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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction

JANUARY

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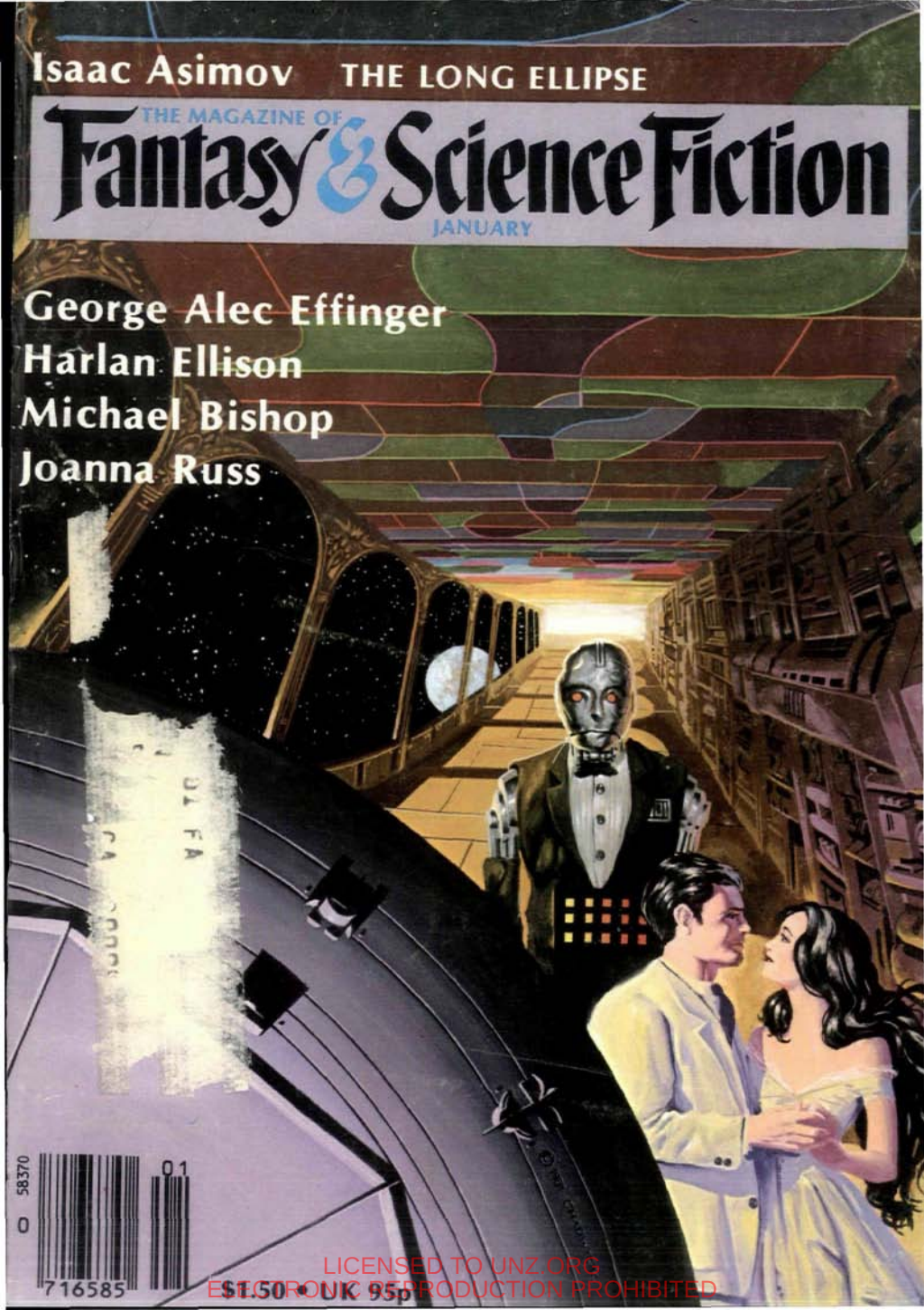

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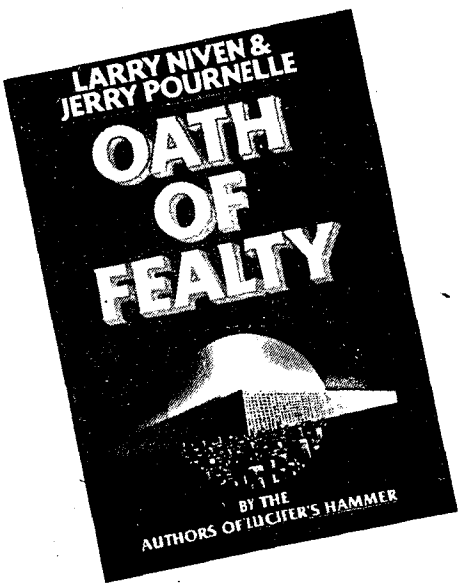

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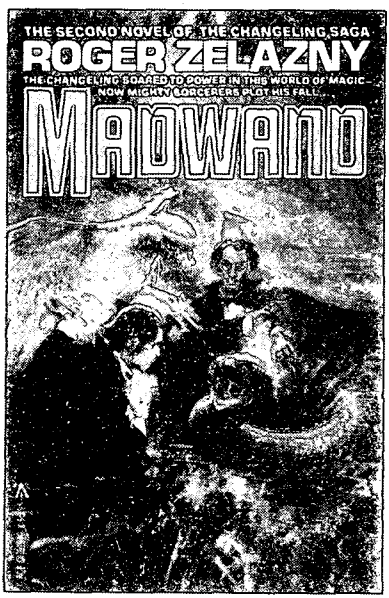
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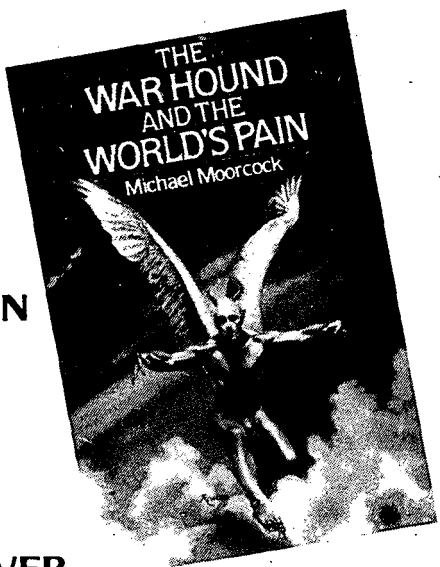

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Critics have long complained about science fiction's normally skimpy characterization, but here is a story that is full of color and action and which also creates one of SF's memorable characters, the Abbess Radegunde. Joanna Russ tells us that this is part of a longer work, a future history, which she is currently writing (though this story is complete and may be enjoyed on its own).

Souls

BY

JOANNA RUSS

Deprived of other Banquet
I entertained myself—
—Emily Dickinson

This is the tale of the Abbess Radegunde and what happened when the Norsemen came. I tell it not as it was told to me but as I saw it, for I was a child then and the Abbess had made a pet and errand boy of me, although the stern old Wardress, Cunigunt, who had outlived the previous Abbess, said I was more in the Abbey than out of it and a scandal. But the Abbess would only say mildly, "Dear Cunigunt, a scandal at the age of seven?" which was turning it off with a joke, for she knew how harsh and disliking my new stepmother was to me and my father did not care and I with no sisters or brothers. You must understand that joking and calling people "dear" and "my dear" was only her manner; she was in every way an unusual woman. The previous Abbess, Herrade, had found that Radegunde, who had been given to her to be fostered, had great gifts and so sent the child south to be taught, and that has never happened here before. The story has it that the Abbess Herrade found Radegunde seeming to read the great illuminated book in the Abbess's study; the child had somehow pulled it off its stand and was sitting on the floor with the volume in her lap, sucking her thumb, and turning the pages with her other hand just as if she were reading.

"Little two-years," said the Abbess Herrade, who was a kind woman, "what are you doing?" She thought it amusing, I suppose, that Radegunde should pretend to read this great book, the largest and finest in the Abbey,

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which had many, many books more than any other nunnery or monastery I have ever heard of: a full forty then, as I remember. And then little Radegunde was doing the book no harm.

"Reading, Mother," said the little girl.

"Oh, reading?" said the Abbess, smiling. "Then tell me what you are reading," and she pointed to the page.

"This," said Radegunde, "is a great *D* with flowers and other beautiful things about it, which is to show that *Dominus*, our Lord God, is the greatest thing and the most beautiful and makes everything to grow and be beautiful, and then it goes on to say *Domine nobis pacem*, which means *Give peace to us, O Lord.*"

Then the Abbess began to be frightened but she said only, "Who showed you this?" thinking that Radegunde had heard someone read and tell the words or had been pestering the nuns on the sly.

"No one," said the child. "Shall I go on?" and she read page after page of the Latin, in each case telling what the words meant.

There is more to the story, but I will say only that after many prayers the Abbess Herrade sent her foster daughter far southwards, even to Poitiers, where Saint Radegunde had ruled an Abbey before, and some say even to Rome, and in these places Radegunde was taught all learning, for all learning there is in the world remains in these places. Radegunde came back a grown woman and nursed the Abbess through her last illness and then became Abbess in her turn. They say that the great folk of the Church down there in the south wanted to keep her because she was such a prodigy of female piety and learning, there where life is safe and comfortable and less rude than it is here, but she said that the gray skies and flooding winters of her birthplace called to her very soul. She often told me the story when I was a child: how headstrong she had been and how defiant, and how she had sickened so desperately for her native land that they had sent her back, deciding that a rude life in the mud of a northern village would be a good cure for such a rebellious soul as hers.

"And so it was," she would say, patting my cheek or tweaking my ear. "See how humble I am now?" for you understand, all this about her rebellious girlhood, twenty years' back, was a kind of joke between us. "Don't you do it," she would tell me and we would laugh together, I so heartily at the very idea of my being a pious monk full of learning that I would hold my sides and be unable to speak..

She was kind to everyone. She knew all the languages, not only ours, but the Irish too and the tongues folk speak to the north and south, and Latin and Greek also, and all the other languages in the world, both to read and write. She knew how to cure sickness, both the old women's way with

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herbs or leeches and out of books also. And never was there a more pious woman! Some speak ill of her now she's gone and say she was too merry to be a good Abbess, but she would say, "Merriment is God's flowers," and when the winter wind blew her headdress awry and showed the gray hair — which happened once; I was there and saw the shocked faces of the Sisters with her — she merely tapped the band back into place, smiling and saying, "Impudent wind! Thou showest thou hast power which is more than our silly human power, for it is from God" — and this quite satisfied the girls with her.

No one ever saw her angry. She was impatient sometimes, but in a kindly way, as if her mind were elsewhere. It was in Heaven, I used to think, for I have seen her pray for hours or sink to her knees — right in the marsh! — to see the wild duck fly south, her hands clasped and a kind of wild joy on her face, only to rise a moment later, looking at the mud on her habit and crying half-ruefully, half in laughter, "Oh, what will Sister Laundress say to me? I am hopeless! Dear child, tell no one; I will say I fell," and then she would clap her hand to her mouth, turning red and laughing even harder, saying, "I *am* hopeless, telling lies!"

The town thought her a saint, of course. We were all happy then, or so it seems to me now, and all lucky and well, with this happiness of having her amongst us burning and blooming in our midst like a great fire around which we could all warm ourselves, even those who didn't know why life seemed so good. There was less illness; the food was better; the very weather stayed mild; and people did not quarrel as they had before her time and do again now. Nor do I think, considering what happened at the end, that all this was nothing but the fancy of a boy who's found his mother, for that's what she was to me; I brought her all the gossip and ran errands when I could, and she called me Boy News in Latin; I was happier than I have ever been.

And then one day those terrible, beaked prows appeared in our river.

I was with her when the warning came, in the main room of the Abbey tower just after the first fire of the year had been lit in the great hearth; we thought ourselves safe, for they had never been seen so far south and it was too late in the year for any sensible shipman to be in our waters. The Abbey was host to three Irish priests who turned pale when young Sister Sibihd burst in with the news, crying and wringing her hands; one of the brothers exclaimed a thing in Latin which means "God protect us!" for they had been telling us stories of the terrible sack of the monastery of Saint Columbanus and how everyone had run away with the precious manuscripts or had hidden in the woods, and that was how Father Cairbre and

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the two others had decided to go "walk the world," for this (the Abbess had been telling it all to me, for I had no Latin) is what the Irish say when they leave their native land to travel elsewhere.

"God protects our souls, not our bodies," said the Abbess Radegunde briskly. She had been talking with the priests in their own language or in the Latin, but this she said in ours so even the women workers from the village would understand. Then she said, "Father Cairbre, take your friends and the younger Sisters to the underground passages; Sister Diemud, open the gates to the villagers; half of them will be trying to get behind the Abbey walls and the others will be fleeing to the marsh. You, Boy News, down to the cellars with the girls." But I did not go and she never saw it; she was up and looking out one of the window slits instantly. So was I. I had always thought the Norsemen's big ships came right up on land — on legs, I supposed — and was disappointed to see that after they came up our river they stayed in the water like other ships and the men were coming ashore in little boats, which they were busy pulling up on shore through the sand and mud. Then the Abbess repeated her order — "Quickly! Quickly!" — and before anyone knew what had happened, she was gone from the room. I watched from the tower window; in the turmoil nobody bothered about me. Below, the Abbey grounds and gardens were packed with folk, all stepping on the herb plots and the Abbess's paestum roses, and great logs were being dragged to bar the door set in the stone walls round the Abbey, not high walls, to tell truth, and Radegunde was going quickly through the crowd, crying: Do this! Do that! Stay, thou! Go, thou! and like things.

Then she reached the door and motioned Sister Oddha, the doorkeeper, aside — the old Sister actually fell to her knees in entreaty — and all this, you must understand, was wonderfully pleasant to me. I had no more idea of danger than a puppy. There was some tumult by the door — I think the men with the logs were trying to get in her way — and Abbess Radegunde took out from the neck of her habit her silver crucifix, brought all the way from Rome, and shook it impatiently at those who would keep her in. So or course they let her through at once.

I settled into my corner of the window, waiting for the Abbess's crucifix to bring down God's lightning on those tall, fair men who defied Our Savior and the law and were supposed to wear animal horns on their heads, though these did not (and I found out later that's just a story; that is not what the Norse do). I did hope that the Abbess, or Our Lord, would wait just a little while before destroying them, for I wanted to get a good look at them before they all died, you understand. I was somewhat disappointed, as they seemed to be wearing breeches with

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leggings under them and tunics on top, like ordinary folk, and cloaks also, though some did carry swords and axes and there were round shields piled on the beach at one place. But the long hair they had was fine, and the bright colors of their clothes, and the monsters growing out of the heads of the ships were splendid and very frightening, even though one could see that they were only painted, like the pictures in the Abbess's books.

I decided that God had provided me with enough edification and could now strike down the impious strangers.

But He did not.

Instead the Abbess walked alone towards these fierce men, over the stony river bank, as calmly as if she were on a picnic with her girls. She was singing a little song, a pretty tune that I repeated many years later, and a well-traveled man said it was a Norse cradle-song. I didn't know that then, but only that the terrible, fair men, who had looked up in surprise at seeing one lone woman come out of the Abbey (which was barred behind her; I could see that), now began a sort of whispering astonishment among themselves. I saw the Abbess's gaze go quickly from one to the other — we often said that she could tell what was hidden in the soul from one look at the face — and then she picked the skirt of her habit up with one hand and daintily went among the rocks to one of the men, one older than the others, as it proved later, though I could not see so well at the time — and said to him, in his own language:

"Welcome, Thorvald Einarsson, and what do you, good farmer, so far from your own place, with the harvest ripe and the great autumn storms coming on over the sea?" (You may wonder how I knew what she said when I had no Norse; the truth is that Father Cairbre, who had not gone to the cellars after all, was looking out the top of the window while I was barely able to peep out the bottom, and he repeated everything that was said for the folk in the room, who all kept very quiet.)

Now you could see that the pirates were dumfounded to hear her speak their own language and even more so that she called one by his name; some stepped backwards and made strange signs in the air and others unsheathed axes or swords and came running towards the Abbess. But this Thorvald Einarsson put up his hand for them to stop and laughed heartily.

"Think!" he said. "There's no magic here, only cleverness — what pair of ears could miss my name with the lot of you bawling out 'Thorvald Einarsson, help me with this oar;' 'Thorvald Einarsson, my leggings are wet to the knees;' 'Thorvald Einarsson, this stream is as cold as a Fimbul-winter!"

The Abbess Radegunde nodded and smiled. Then she sat down plump on the river bank. She scratched behind one ear, as I had often seen her do when she was deep in thought. Then

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she said (and I am sure that this talk was carried on in a loud voice so that we in the Abbey could hear it):

"Good friend Thorvald, you are as clever as the tale I heard of you from your sister's son, Ranulf, from whom I learnt the Norse when I was in Rome, and to show you it was he, he always swore by his gray horse, Lamefoot, and he had a difficulty in his speech; he could not say the sounds as we do and so spoke of you always as 'Torvald.' Is not that so?"

I did not realize it then, being only a child, but the Abbess was — by this speech — claiming hospitality from the man and had also picked by chance or inspiration the cleverest among these thieves, for his next words were:

"I am not the leader. There are no leaders here."

He was warning her that they were not his men to control, you see. So she scratched behind her ear again and got up. Then she began to wander, as if she did not know what to do, from one to the other of these uneasy folk — for some backed off and made signs at her still, and some took out their knives — singing her little tune again and walking slowly, more bent over and older and infirm-looking than we had ever seen her, one helpless little woman in black before all those fierce men. One wild young pirate snatched the headdress from her as she passed, leaving her short gray hair bare to the wind; the others laughed and he that had done it cried out:

"Grandmother, are you not ashamed?"

"Why, good friend, of what?" said she mildly.

"Thou art married to thy Christ," he said, holding the head-covering behind his back, "but this bridegroom of thine cannot even defend thee against the shame of having thy head uncovered! Now if thou wert married to me—"

There was much laughter. The Abbess Radegunde waited until it was over. Then she scratched her bare head and made as if to turn away, but suddenly she turned back upon him with the age and infirmity dropping from her as if they had been a cloak, seeming taller and very grand, as if lit from within by some great fire. She looked directly into his face. This thing she did was something we had all seen, of course, but they had not, nor had they heard that great, grand voice with which she sometimes read the Scriptures to us or talked with us of the wrath of God. I think the young man was frightened, for all his daring. And I know now what I did not then: that the Norse admire courage above all things and that — to be blunt — everyone likes a good story, especially if it happens right in front of your eyes.

"Grandson!" — and her voice tolled like the great bell of God; I think folk must have heard her all the way to the marsh! — "Little grandchild, thinkest thou that the Creator of the World who made the stars and the moon and the sun and our bodies,

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too and the change of the seasons and the very earth we stand on — yea, even unto the shit in thy belly! — thinkest thou that such a being has a big house in the sky where he keeps his wives and goes in to fuck them as thou wouldst thyself or like the King of Turkey? Do not dishonor the wit of the mother who bore thee! We are the servants of God, not his wives, and if we tell our silly girls they are married to the Christus, it is to make them understand that they must not run off and marry Otto Farmer or Ekkehard Blacksmith, but stick to their work, as they promised. If I told them they were married to an Idea, they would not understand me, and neither dost thou."

(Here Father Cairbre, above me in the window, muttered in a protesting way about something.)

Then the Abbess snatched the silver cross from around her neck and put it into the boy's hand, saying: "Give this to thy mother with my pity. She must pull out her hair over such a child."

But he let it fall to the ground. He was red in the face and breathing hard.

"Take it up," she said more kindly, "take it up, boy; it will not hurt thee and there's no magic in it. It's only pure silver and good workmanship; it will make thee rich." When she saw that he would not — his hand went to his knife — she *tched* to herself in a motherly way (or I believe she did, for she waved one hand back and forth as she always did when she made that sound) and got down on her knees — with more difficulty than was truth, I think — saying loudly, "I will stoop, then; I will stoop," and got up, holding it out to him, saying, "Take. Two sticks tied with a cord would serve me as well."

The boy cried, his voice breaking, "My mother is dead and thou art a witch!" and in an instant he had one arm around the Abbess's neck and with the other his knife at her throat. The man Thorvald Einarsson roared "Thorfinn!" but the Abbess only said clearly, "Let him be. I have shamed this man but did not mean to. He is right to be angry."

The boy released her and turned his back. I remember wondering if these strangers could weep. Later I heard — and I swear that the Abbess must have somehow known this or felt it, for although she was no witch, she could probe a man until she found the sore places in him and that very quickly — that this boy's mother had been known for an adulteress and that no man would own him as a son. It is one thing among those people for a man to have what the Abbess called a concubine and they do not hold the children of such in scorn as we do, but it is a different thing when a married woman has more than one man. Such was Thorfinn's case; I suppose that was what had sent him *viking*. But all this came later; what I saw then — with my nose barely above the window slit — was that the Abbess slipped her crucifix over the hilt of the boy's sword

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she really wished him to have it, you see — and then walked to a place near the walls of the Abbey but far from the Norsemen. I think she meant them to come to her. I saw her pick up her skirts like a peasant woman, sit down with legs crossed, and say in a loud voice:

"Come! Who will bargain with me?"

A few strolled over, laughing, and sat down with her.

"All!" she said, gesturing them closer.

"And why should we all come?" said one who was farthest away.

"Because you will miss a bargain," said the Abbess.

"Why should we bargain when we can take?" said another.

"Because you will only get half," said the Abbess. "The rest you will not find."

"We will ransack the Abbey," said a third.

"Half the treasure is not in the Abbey," said she.

"And where is it then?"

She tapped her forehead. They were drifting over by twos and threes. I have heard since that the Norse love riddles and this was a sort of riddle; she was giving them good fun.

"If it is in your head," said the man Thorvald, who was standing behind the others, arms crossed, "we can get it out, can we not?" And he tapped the hilt of his knife.

"If you frighten me, I shall become confused and remember nothing." said the Abbess calmly. "Besides, do you wish to play that old game? You saw how well it worked the last time. I am surprised at you, Ranulf mother's-brother."

"I will bargain then," said the man Thorvald, smiling.

"And the rest of you?" said Radegunde, "It must be all or none; decide for yourselves whether you wish to save yourselves trouble and danger and be rich," and she deliberately turned her back on them. The men moved down to the river's edge and began to talk among themselves, dropping their voices so that we could not hear them any more. Father Cairbre, who was old and short-sighted, cried, "I cannot hear them. What are they doing?" and I cleverly said, "I have good eyes, Father Cairbre," and he held me up to see. So it was just at the time that the Abbess Radegunde was facing the Abbey tower that I appeared in the window. She clapped one hand across her mouth. Then she walked to the gate and called (in a voice I had learned not to disregard; it had often got me a smacked bottom), "Boy News, down! Come down to me here *at once!* And bring Father Cairbre with you."

I was overjoyed. I had no idea that she might want to protect me if anything went wrong. My only thought was that I was going to see it all from wonderfully close by. So I wormed my way, half-suffocated, through the folk in the tower room, stepping on feet

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and skirts, and having to say every few seconds, "But I *have* to! The Abbess wants me," and meanwhile she was calling outside like an Empress, "Let that boy through! Make a place for that boy! Let the Irish priest through!" until I crept and pushed and complained my way to the very wall itself — no one was going to open the gate for us, of course — and there was a great fuss and finally someone brought a ladder. I was over at once, but the old priest took a longer time, although it was a low wall, as I've said, the builders having been somewhat of two minds about making the Abbey into a true fortress.

Once outside it was lovely, away from all that crowd, and I ran, gloriously pleased, to the Abbess, who said only, "Stay by me, whatever happens," and immediately turned her attention away from me. It had taken so long to get Father Cairbre outside the walls that the tall, foreign men had finished their talking and were coming back — all twenty or thirty of them — towards the Abbey and the Abbess Radegunde, and most especially of all, me. I could see Father Cairbre tremble. They did look grim, close by, with their long, wild hair and the brightness of their strange clothes. I remember that they smelled different from us, but cannot remember how after all these years. Then the Abbess spoke to them in that outlandish language of theirs, so strangely light and lilting to hear from their bearded lips, and then she said something in Latin to Father Cairbre, and he said, with a shake in his voice:

"This is the priest, Father Cairbre, who will say our bargains aloud in our own tongue so that my people may hear. I cannot deal behind their backs. And this is my foster baby, who is very dear to me and who is now having his curiosity rather too much satisfied, I think." (I was trying to stand tall like a man but had one hand secretly holding onto her skirt; so that was what the foreign men had chuckled at!) The talk went on, but I will tell it as if I had understood the Norse, for to repeat everything twice would be tedious.

The Abbess Radegunde said, "Will you bargain?"

There was a general nodding of heads, with a look of: After all, why not?

"And who will speak for you?" said she.

A man stepped forward; I recognized Thorvald Einarsson.

"Ah, yes," said the Abbess dryly. "The company that has no leaders. Is this leaderless company agreed? Will it abide by its word? I want no treachery-planners, no Breakwords here!"

There was a general mutter at this. The Thorvald man (he *was* big, close up!) said mildly, "I sail with none such. Let's begin."

We all sat down.

"Now," said Thorvald Einarsson, raising his eyebrows, "according to my knowledge of this thing, you begin. And according to my knowledge, you

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will begin by saying that you are very poor."

"But, no," said the Abbess, "we are rich." Father Cairbre groaned. A groan answered him from behind the Abbey walls. Only the Abbess and Thorvald Einarsson seemed unmoved; it was as if these two were joking in some way that no one else understood. The Abbess went on, saying, "We are very rich. Within is much silver, much gold, many pearls, and much embroidered cloth, much fine-woven cloth, much carved and painted wood, and many books with gold upon their pages and jewels set into their covers. All this is yours. But we have more and better: herbs and medicines, ways to keep food from spoiling, the knowledge of how to cure the sick; all this is yours. And we have more and better even than this: we have the knowledge of Christ and the perfect understanding of the soul, which is yours too, any time you wish; you have only to accept it."

Thorvald Einarsson held up his hand. "We will stop with the first," he said, "and perhaps a little of the second. That is more practical."

"And foolish," said the Abbess politely, "in the usual way." And again I had the odd feeling that these two were sharing a joke no one else even saw. She added, "There is one thing you may not have, and that is the most precious of all."

Thorvald Einarsson looked inquiring.

"*My people.* Their safety is dearer to me than myself. They are not to be touched, not a hair on their heads, not for any reason. Think: you can fight your way into the Abbey easily enough, but the folk in there are very frightened of you, and some of the men are armed. Even a good fighter is cumbered in a crowd. You will slip and fall upon each other without meaning to or knowing that you do so. Heed my counsel. Why play butcher when you can have treasure poured into your laps like kings, without work? And after that there will be as much again, when I lead you to the hidden place. An earl's mountain of treasure. Think of it! And to give all this up for slaves, half of whom will get sick and die before you get them home — and will need to be fed if they are to be any good. Shame on you for bad advice-takers! Imagine what you will say to your wives and families: Here are a few miserable bolts of cloth with blood spots that won't come out, here are some pearls and jewels smashed to powder in the fighting, here is a torn piece of embroidery which was whole until someone stepped on it in the battle, and I had slaves but they died of illness and I fucked a pretty young nun and meant to bring her back, but she leapt into the sea. And, oh, yes, there was twice as much again and all of it whole but we decided not to take that. Too much trouble, you see."

This was a lively story and the Norsemen enjoyed it. Radegunde held up her hand.

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"People!" she called in German, adding, "Sea-rovers, hear what I say; I will repeat it for you in your tongue." (And so she did.) *"People, if the Norsemen fight us, do not defend yourselves but smash everything! Wives, take your cooking knives and shred the valuable cloth to pieces! Men, with your axes and hammers hew the altars and the carved wood to fragkments! All, grind the pearls and smash the jewels against the stone floors! Break the bottles of wine! Pound the gold and silver to shapelessness! Tear to pieces the illuminated books! Tear down the hangings and burn them!*

"But" (she added, her voice suddenly mild) "if these wise men will accept our gifts, let us heap untouched and spotless at their feet all that we have and hold nothing back, so that their kinsfolk will marvel and wonder at the shining and glistering of the wealth they bring back, though it leave us nothing but our bare stone walls."

If anyone had ever doubted that the Abbess Radegunde was inspired by God, their doubts must have vanished away, for who could resist the fiery vigor of her first speech or the beneficent unction of her second? The Norsemen sat there with their mouths open. I saw tears on Father Cairbre's cheeks. Then Thorvald said, "Abbess—"

He stopped. He tried again but again stopped. Then he shook himself, as a man who has been under a spell, and said:

"Abbess, my men have been without women for a long time."

Radegunde looked surprised. She looked as if she could not believe what she had heard. She looked the pirate up and down, as if puzzled, and then walked around him as if taking his measure. She did this several times, looking at every part of his big body as if she were summing him up while he got redder and redder. Then she backed off and surveyed him again, and with her arms akimbo like a peasant, announced very loudly in both Norse and German:

"What! Have they lost the use of their hands?"

It was irresistible, in its way. The Norse laughed. Our people laughed. Even Thorvald laughed. I did too, though I was not sure what everyone was laughing about. The laughter would die down and then begin again behind the Abbey walls, helplessly, and again die down and again begin. The Abbess waited until the Norsemen had stopped laughing and then called for silence in German until there were only a few snickers here and there. She then said:

"These good men — Father Cairbre, tell the people — these good men will forgive my silly joke. I meant no scandal, truly, and no harm, but laughter is good; it settles the body's waters, as the physicians say. And my people know that I am not always as solemn and good as I ought to be. Indeed I am a very great sinner and scan-

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dal-maker. Thorvald Einarsson, do we do business.?"

The big man — who had not been so pleased as the others, I can tell you! — looked at his men and seemed to see what he needed to know. He said, "I go in with five men to see what you have. Then we let the poor folk on the grounds go, but not those inside the Abbey. Then we search again. The gates will be locked and guarded by the rest of us; if there's any treachery, the bargain's off."

"Then I will go with you," said Radegunde. "That is very just and my presence will calm the people. To see us together will assure them that no harm is meant. You are a good man, Torvald — forgive me; I call you as your nephew did so often. Come, Boy News, hold on to me."

"Open the gates!" she called then. "All is safe!" and with the five men (one of whom was that young Thorfinn who had hated her so) we waited while the great logs were pulled back. There was little space within, but the people shrank back at the sight of those fierce warriors and opened a place for us.

I looked back and the Norsemen had come in and were standing just inside the walls, on either side the gate, with their swords out and their shields up. The crowd parted for us more slowly as we reached the main tower, with the Abbess repeating constantly, "Be calm, people, be calm. All is well," and deftly speaking by name to this one or that. It was much harder when the people gasped upon hearing the big logs pushed shut with a noise like thunder, and it was very close on the stairs; I heard her say something like an apology in the queer foreign tongue. Something that probably meant, "I'm sorry that we must wait." It seemed an age until the stairs were even partly clear and I saw what the Abbess had meant by the cumbering of a crowd; a man might swing a weapon in the press of people, but not very far, and it was more likely he would simply fall over someone and crack his head. We gained the great room with the big crucifix of painted wood and the little one of pearls and gold, and the scarlet hangings worked in gold thread that I had played robbers behind so often before I learned what real robbers were: these tall, frightening men whose eyes glistened with greed at what I had fancied every village had. Most of the Sisters had stayed in the great room, but somehow it was not so crowded, as the folk had huddled back against the walls when the Norsemen came in. The youngest girls were all in a corner, terrified — one could smell it, as one can in people — and when that young Thorfinn went for the little gold-and-pearl cross, Sister Sibihd cried in a high, cracked voice, "It is the body of our Christ!" and leapt up, snatching it from the wall before he could get to it.

"Sibihd!" exclaimed the Abbess, in as sharp a voice as I had ever heard her use. "Put that back or you will feel the

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weight of my hand, I tell you!

Now it is odd, is it not, that a young woman desperate enough not to care about death at the hands of a Norse pirate should nonetheless be frightened away at the threat of getting a few slaps from her Abbess? But folk are like that. Sister Sibihd returned the cross to its place (from whence young Thorfinn took it) and fell back among the nuns, sobbing, "He desecrates our Lord God!"

"Foolish girl!" snapped the Abbess. "God only can consecrate or desecrate; man cannot. That is a piece of metal."

Thorvald said something sharp to Thorfinn, who slowly put the cross back on its hook with a sulky look which said, plainer than words: Nobody gives me what I want. Nothing else went wrong in the big room or the Abbess's study or the storerooms, or out in the kitchens. The Norsemen were silent and kept their hands on their swords, but the Abbess kept talking in a calm way in both tongues; to our folk she said, "See? It is all right but everyone must keep still. God will protect us." Her face was steady and clear, and I believed her a saint, for she had saved Sister Sibihd and the rest of us.

But this peacefulness did not last, of course. Something had to go wrong in all that press of people; to this day I do not know what. We were in a corner of the long refectory, which is the place where the Sisters or Brothers eat in an Abbey, when something pushed me into the wall and I fell, almost suffocated by the Abbess's lying on top of me. My head was ringing and on all sides there was a terrible roaring sound with curses and screams, a dreadful tumult as if the walls had come apart and were falling on everyone. I could hear the Abbess whispering something in Latin over and over in my ear. There were dull, ripe sounds, worse than the rest, which I know now to have been the noise steel makes when it is thrust into bodies. This all seemed to go on forever and then it seemed to me that the floor was wet. Then all became quiet. I felt the Abbess Radegunde get off me. She said:

"So this is how you wash your floors up North." When I lifted my head from the rushes and saw what she meant, I was very sick into the corner. Then she picked me up in her arms and held my face against her bosom so that I would not see, but it was no use; I had already seen: all the people lying sprawled on the floor with their bellies coming out, like heaps of dead fish, old Walafrid with an axe handle standing out of his chest — he was sitting up with his eyes shut in a press of bodies that gave him no room to lie down — and the young beekeeper, Uta, from the village, who had been so merry, lying on her back with her long braids and her gown all dabbled in red dye and a great stain of it on her belly. She was breathing fast and her eyes were wide open. As we passed her, the noise of her breathing ceased.

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The Abbess said mildly, "Thy people are thorough housekeepers, Earl Split-gut."

Thorvald Einarsson roared something at us, and the Abbess replied softly, "Forgive me, good friend. You protected me and the boy and I am grateful. But nothing betrays a man's knowledge of the German like a word that bites, is it not so? And I had to be sure."

It came to me then that she had called him "Torvald" and reminded him of his sister's son so that he would feel he must protect us if anything went wrong. But now she would make him angry, I thought, and I shut my eyes tight. Instead he laughed and said in odd, light German, "I did no housekeeping but to stand over you and your pet. Are you not grateful?"

"Oh, very, thank you," said the Abbess with such warmth as she might show to a Sister who had brought her a rose from the garden, or another who copied her work well, or when I told her news, or if Ita the cook made a good soup. But he did not know that the warmth was for everyone and so seemed satisfied. By now we were in the garden and the air was less foul; she put me down, although my limbs were shaking, and I clung to her gown, crumpled, stiff, and blood-reeking though it was. She said, "Oh my God, what a deal of washing hast Thou given us!" She started to walk towards the gate, and Thorvald Einarsson took a step towards her. She said, without turning round: "Do not insist, Thorvald, there is no reason to lock me up. I am forty years old and not likely to be running away into the swamp, what with my rheumatism and the pain in my knees and the folk needing me as they do."

There was a moment's silence. I could see something odd come into the big man's face. He said quietly:

"I did not speak, Abbess."

She turned, surprised. "But you did. I heard you."

He said strangely, "I did not."

Children can guess sometimes what is wrong and what to do about it without knowing how; I remember saying, very quickly, "Oh, she does that sometimes. My stepmother says old age has addled her wits," and then, "Abbess, may I go to my stepmother and my father?"

"Yes, of course," she said, "run along, Boy News—" and then stopped, looking into the air as if seeing in it something we could not. Then she said very gently, "No, my dear, you had better stay here with me," and I knew, as surely as if I had seen it with my own eyes, that I was not to go to my stepmother or my father because both were dead.

She did things like that, too, sometimes.

For a while it seemed that everyone was dead. I did not feel grieved or frightened in the least, but I think I

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must have been, for I had only one idea in my head: that if I let the Abbess out of my sight, I would die. So I followed her everywhere. She was let to move about and comfort people, especially the mad Sibihd, who would do nothing but rock and wail, but towards nightfall, when the Abbey had been stripped of its treasures, Thorvald Einarsson put her and me in her study, now bare of its grand furniture, on a straw pallet on the floor, and bolted the door on the outside. She said:

"Boy News, would you like to go to Constantinople, where the Turkish Sultan is, and the domes of gold and all the splendid pagans? For that is where this man will take me to sell me."

"Oh, yes!" said I, and then: "But will he take me, too?"

"Of course," said the Abbess, and so it was settled. Then in came Thorvald Einarsson, saying:

"Thorfinn is asking for you." I found out later that they were waiting for him to die; none other of the Norse had been wounded, but a farmer had crushed Thorfinn's chest with an axe, and he was expected to die before morning. The Abbess said:

"Is that a good reason to go?" She added, "I mean that he hates me; will not his anger at my presence make him worse?"

Thorvald said slowly, "The folk here say you can sit by the sick and heal them. Can you do that?"

"To my own knowledge, not at all," said the Abbess Radegunde, "but if they believe so, perhaps that calms them and makes them better. Christians are quite as foolish as other people, you know. I will come if you want," and though I saw that she was pale with tiredness, she got to her feet. I should say that she was in a plain, brown gown taken from one of the peasant women because her own was being washed clean, but to me she had the same majesty as always. And for him too, I think.

Thorvald said, "Will you pray for him or damn him?"

She said, "I do not pray, Thorvald, and I never damn anybody; I merely sit." She added, "Oh, let him; he'll scream your ears off if you don't," and this meant me, for I was ready to yell for my life if they tried to keep me from her.

They had put Thorfinn in the chapel, a little stone room with nothing left in it now but a plain wooden cross, not worth carrying off. He was lying, his eyes closed, on the stone altar with furs under him, and his face was gray. Every time he breathed, there was a bubbling sound, a little, thin, reedy sound; and as I crept closer, I saw why, for in the young man's chest was a great red hole with sharp pink things sticking out of it, all crushed, and in the hole one could see something jump and fall, jump and fall, over and over again. It was his heart beating. Blood kept coming from his lips in a froth. I do not know, of course, what either said, for they spoke in the Norse, but I

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saw what they did and heard much of it talked of between the Abbess and Thorvald Einarsson later. So I will tell it as if I knew.

The first thing the Abbess did was to stop suddenly on the threshold and raise both hands to her mouth as if in horror. Then she cried furiously to the two guards:

"Do you wish to kill your comrade with the cold and damp? Is this how you treat one another? Get fire in here and some woollen cloth to put over him! No, not more skins, you idiots, *wool* to mold to his body and take up the wet. Run now!"

One said sullenly, "We don't take orders from you, Grandma."

"Oh, no?" said she. "Then I shall strip this wool dress from my old body and put it over that boy and then sit here all night in my flabby, naked skin! What will this child's soul say when it enters the Valhall? That his friends would not give up a little of their booty so that he might fight for life? Is this your fellowship? Do it, or I will strip myself and shame you both for the rest of your lives!"

"Well, take it from his share," said the one in a low voice, and the other ran out. Soon there was a fire on the hearth and russet-colored woollen cloth — "From my own share," said one of them loudly, though it was a color the least costly, not like blue or red — and the Abbess laid it loosely over the boy, carefully putting it close to his sides but not moving him. He did not look to be in any pain, but his color got no better. But then he opened his eyes and said in such a little voice as a ghost might have, a whisper as thin and reedy and bubbling as his breath:

"You ... old witch. But I beat you ... in the end."

"Did you, my dear?" said the Abbess. "How?"

"Treasure," he said, "for my kinfolk. And I lived as a man at last. Fought ... and had a woman ... the one here with the big breasts, Sibihd.... Whether she liked it or not. That was good."

"Yes, Sibihd," said the Abbess mildly. "Sibihd has gone mad. She hears no one and speaks to no one. She only sits and rocks and moans and soils herself and will not feed herself, although if one puts food in her mouth with a spoon, she will swallow."

The boy tried to frown. "Stupid," he said at last. "Stupid nuns. The beasts do it."

"Do they?" said the Abbess, as if this were a new idea to her. "Now that is very odd. For never yet heard I of a gander that blacked the goose's eye or hit her over the head with a stone or stuck a knife in her entrails when he was through. When God puts it into their hearts to desire one another, she squats and he comes running. And a bitch in heat will jump through the window if you lock the door. Poor fools! Why didn't you camp three hours' down-river and wait? In a week

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half the young married women in the village would have been slipping away at night to see what the foreigners were like. Yes, and some unmarried ones, and some of my own girls, too. But you couldn't wait, could you?"

"No," said the boy, with the ghost of a brag. "Better ... this way."

"*This* way," said she. "Oh, yes, my dear, old Granny knows about *this* way! Pleasure for the count of three or four, and the rest of it as much joy as rolling a stone uphill."

He smiled a ghostly smile. "You're a whore, Grandma."

She began to stroke his forehead. "No, Grandbaby," she said, "but all Latin is not the Church Fathers, you know, great as they are. One can find a great deal in those strange books written by the ones who died centuries before our Lord was born. Listen," and she leaned closer to him and said quietly:

> "Syrian dancing girl, how subtly
> you sway those sensuous limbs,
> "Half-drunk in the smoky tavern,
> lascivious and wanton,
> "Your long hair bound back in the
> Greek way, clashing the castanets in your hands—"

The boy was too weak to do anything but look astonished. Then she said this:

> "I love you so that anyone permitted to sit near you and talk to you seems to me like a god; when I am near you my spirit is broken, my heart shakes, my voice dies, and I can't even speak. Under my skin I flame up all over and I can't see; there's thunder in my ears and I break out in a sweat, as if from fever; I turn paler than cut grass and feel that I am utterly changed; I feel that Death has come near me."

He said, as if frightened, "Nobody feels like that."

"They do," she said.

He said, in feeble alarm, "You're trying to kill me!"

She said, "No, my dear. I simply don't want you to die a virgin."

It was odd, his saying those things and yet holding on to her hand where he had got at it through the woollen cloth; she stroked his head and he whispered, "Save me, old witch."

"I'll do my best," she said. "You shall do your best by not talking and I by not tormenting you any more, and we'll both try to sleep."

"Pray," said the boy.

"Very well," said she, "but I'll need a chair," and the guards — seeing I suppose, that he was holding her hand — brought in one of the great wooden chairs from the Abbey, which were too plain and heavy to carry off, I think. Then the Abbess Radegunde sat in the chair and closed her eyes. Thorfinn seemed to fall asleep. I crept nearer her on the floor and must have fallen asleep myself almost at once, for the next thing I knew a gray light filled the chapel, the fire had gone out, and

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someone was shaking Radegunde, who still slept in her chair, her head leaning to one side. It was Thorvald Einarsson and he was shouting with excitement in his strange German, "Woman, how did you do it! How did you do it!"

"Do what?" said the Abbess thickly. "Is he dead?"

"Dead?" exlaimed the Norseman. "He is healed! Healed! The lung is whole and all is closed up about the heart and the shattered pieces of the ribs are grown together! Even the muscles of the chest are beginning to heal!"

"That's good," said the Abbess, still half asleep. "Let me be."

Thorvald shook her again. She said again, "Oh, let me sleep." This time he hauled her to her feet and she shrieked, "My back, my back! Oh, the saints, my rheumatism!" and at the same time a sick voice from under the blue woolliens — a sick voice but a man's voice, not a ghost's — said something in Norse.

"Yes, I hear you," said the Abbess. "You must become a follower of the White Christ right away, this very minute. But *Dominus noster*, please do You put it into these brawny heads that I must have a tub of hot water with pennyroyal in it? I am too old to sleep all night in a chair, and I am one ache from head to foot."

Thorfinn got louder.

"Tell him," said the Abbess Radegunde to Thorvald in German, "that I will not baptize him and I will not shrive him until he is a different man. All that child wants is someone more powerful than your Odin god or your Thor god to pull him out of the next scrape he gets into. Ask him: Will he adopt Sibihd as his sister? Will he clean her when she soils herself and feed her and sit with his arm about her, talking to her gently and lovingly until she is well again? The Christ does not wipe out our sins only to have us commit them all over again, and that is what he wants and what you all want, a God that gives and gives and gives, but God does not give; He takes and takes and takes. He takes away everything that is not God until there is nothing left but God, and none of you will understand that! There is no remission of sins; there is only change, and Thorfinn must change before God will have him."

"Abbess, you are eloquent," said Thorvald, smiling, "but why do you not tell him all this yourself?"

"Because I ache so!" said Radegunde; "Oh, do get me into some hot water!" and Thorvald half led and half supported her as she hobbled out. That morning, after she had had her soak — when I cried, they let me stay just outside the door — she undertook to cure Sibihd, first by rocking her in her arms and talking to her, telling her she was safe now, and promising that the Northmen would go soon, and then when Sibihd became quieter, leading her out into the woods with Thorvald as a bodyguard to see that we did not

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run away, and little, dark Sister Hedwic, who had stayed with Sibihd and cared for her. The Abbess would walk for a while in the mild autumn sunshine, and then she would direct Sibihd's face upwards by touching her gently under the chin and say, "See? There is God's sky still," and then, "Look, there are God's trees; they have not changed," and tell her that the world was just the same and God still kindly to folk, only a few more souls had joined the Blessed and were happier waiting for us in Heaven than we could ever be, or even imagine being, on the poor earth. Sister Hedwic kept hold of Sibihd's hand. No one paid more attention to me than if I had been a dog, but every time poor Sister Sibihd saw Thorvald she would shrink away, and you could see that Hedwic could not bear to look at him at all; every time he came in her sight she turned her face aside, shut her eyes hard, and bit her lower lip. It was a quiet, almost warm day, as autumn can be sometimes, and the Abbess found a few little blue late flowers growing in a sheltered place against a log and put them into Sibihd's hand, speaking of how beautifully and cunningly God had made all things. Sister Sibihd had enough wit to hold on to the flowers, but her eyes stared and she would have stumbled and fallen if Hedwic had not led her.

Sister Hedwic said timidly, "Perhaps she suffers because she has been defiled, Abbess," and then looked ashamed. For a moment the Abbess looked shrewdly at young Sister Hedwic and then at the mad Sibihd. Then she said:

"Dear daughter Sibihd and dear daughter Hedwic, I am now going to tell you something about myself that I have never told to a single living soul but my confessor. Do you know that as a young woman I studied at Avignon and from there was sent to Rome, so that I might gather much learning? Well, in Avignon I read mightily our Christian Fathers but also in the pagan poets, for as it has been said by Ermenrich of Ellwangen: As dung spread upon a field enriches it to good harvest, thus one cannot produce divine eloquence without the filthy writings of the pagan poets. This is true but perilous, only I thought not so, for I was very proud and fancied that if the pagan poems of love left me unmoved, that was because I had the gift of chastity right from God Himself, and I scorned sensual pleasures and those tempted by them. I had forgotten, you see, that chastity is not given once and for all like a wedding ring that is put on never to be taken off, but is a garden which each day must be weeded, watered, and trimmed anew, or soon there will be only brambles and wilderness.

"As I have said, the words of the poets did not tempt me, for words are only marks on the page with no life save what we give them. But in Rome there were not only the old books,

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daughters, but something much worse.

"There were statues. Now you must understand that these are not such as you can imagine from our books, like Saint John or the Virgin; the ancients wrought so cunningly in stone that it is like magic; one stands before the marble holding one's breath, waiting for it to move and speak. They are not statues at all but beautiful, naked men and women. It is a city of seagods pouring water, daughter Sibihd and daughter Hedwic, of athletes about to throw the discus, and runners and wrestlers and young emperors, and the favorites of kings; but they do not walk the streets like real men, for they are all of stone.

"There was one Apollo, all naked, which I knew I should not look on but which I always made some excuse to my companions to pass by, and this statue, although three miles distant from my dwelling, drew me as if by magic. Oh, he was fair to look on! Fairer than any youth alive now in Germany, or in the world, I think. And then all the old loves of the pagan poets came back to me: Dido and Aeneas, the taking of Venus and Mars, the love of the moon, Diana, for the shepherd boy — and I thought that if my statue could only come to life, he would utter honeyed love-words from the old poets and would be wise and brave, too, and what woman could resist him?"

Here she stopped and looked at Sister Sibihd but Sibihd only stared on, holding the little blue flowers. It was Sister Hedwic who cried, one hand pressed to her heart:

'Did you pray, Abbess?"

"I did," said Radegunde solemnly, "and yet my prayers kept becoming something else. I would pray to be delivered from the temptation that was in the statue, and then, of course, I would have to think of the statue itself, and then I would tell myself that I must run, like the nymph Daphne, to be armored and sheltered within a laurel tree, but my feet seemed to be already rooted to the ground, and then at the last minute I would flee and be back at my prayers again. But it grew harder each time, and at last the day came when I did not flee."

"Abbess, *you*?" cried Hedwic, with a gasp. Thorvald, keeping his watch a little way from us, looked surprised. I was very pleased — I loved to see the Abbess astonish people; it was one of her gifts — and at seven I had no knowledge of lust except that my little thing felt good sometimes when I handled it to make water, and what had that to do with statues coming to life or women turning into laurel trees? I was more interested in mad Sibihd, the way children are; I did not know what she might do, or if I should be afraid of her, or if I should go mad myself, what it would be like. But the Abbess was laughing gently at Hedwic's amazement.

"Why not me?" said the Abbess. "I was young and healthy and had no

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special grace from God any more than the hens or the cows do! Indeed, I burned so with desire for that handsome young hero — for so I had made him in my mind, as a woman might do with a man she has seen a few times on the street — that thoughts of him tormented me waking and sleeping. It seemed to me that because of my vows I could not give myself to this Apollo of my own free will. So I would dream that he took me against my will, and, oh, what an exquisite pleasure that was!"

Here Hedwic's blood came all to her face and she covered it with her hands. I could see Thorvald grinning, back where he watched us.

"And then," said the Abbess, as if she had not seen either of them, "a terrible fear came to my heart that God might punish me by sending a ravisher who would use me unlawfully, as I had dreamed my Apollo did, and that I would not even wish to resist him and would feel the pleasures of a base lust and would know myself a whore and a false nun forever after. This fear both tormented and drew me. I began to steal looks at young men in the streets, not letting the other Sisters see me do it, thinking: Will it be he? Or he? Or he?

"And then it happened. I had lingered behind the others at a melon seller's, thinking of no Apollos or handsome heroes but only of the convent's dinner, when I saw my companions disappearing round a corner. I hastened to catch up with them — and made a wrong turning — and was suddenly lost in a narrow street — and at that very moment a young fellow took hold of my habit and threw me to the ground! You may wonder why he should do such a mad thing, but as I found out afterwards, there are prostitutes in Rome who affect our way of dress to please the appetites of certain men who are depraved enough to — well, really, I do not know how to say it! Seeing me alone, he had thought I was one of them and would be glad of a customer and a bit of play. So there was a reason for it.

"Well, there I was on my back with this young fellow, sent as a vengeance by God, as I thought, trying to do exactly what I had dreamed, night after night, that my statue should do. And do you know, it was nothing in the least like my dream! The stones at my back hurt me, for one thing. And instead of melting with delight, I was screaming my head off in terror and kicking at him as he tried to pull up my skirts, and praying to God that this insane man might not break any of my bones in his rage!

"My screams brought a crowd of people and he went running. So I got off with nothing worse than a bruised back and a sprained knee. But the strangest thing of all was that while I was cured forever of lusting after my Apollo, instead I began to be tormented by a new fear — that I had lusted after *him*, that foolish young man with

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the foul breath and the one tooth missing! — and I felt strange creepings and crawlings over my body that were half like desire and half like fear and half like disgust and shame with all sorts of other things mixed in — I know that is too many halves but it is how I felt — and nothing at all like the burning desire I had felt for my Apollo. I went to see the statue once more before I left Rome, and it seemed to look at me sadly, as if to say: Don't blame me, poor girl; I'm only a piece of stone. And that was the last time I was so proud as to believe that God had singled me out for a special gift, like chastity — or a special sin, either — or that being thrown down on the ground and hurt had anything to do with any sin of mine, no matter how I mixed the two together in my mind. I dare say you did not find it a great pleasure yesterday, did you?"

Hedwic shook her head. She was crying quietly. She said, "Thank you, Abbess," and the Abbess embraced her. They both seemed happier, but then all of a sudden Sibihd muttered something, so low that one could not hear her.

"The—" she whispered and then she brought it out but still in a whisper: "The blood."

"What, dear, your blood?" said Radegunde.

"No, mother," said Sibihd, beginning to tremble, "The blood. All over us. Walafrid and — and Uta — and Sister Hildegarde — and everyone broken and spilled out like a dish! And none of us had done anything but I could smell it all over me and the children screaming because they were being trampled down, and those demons come up from Hell though we had done nothing and — and — I understand, mother, about the rest, but I will never, ever forget it, oh Christus, it is all around me now, oh, mother, the *blood*!"

Then Sister Sibihd dropped to her knees on the fallen leaves and began to scream, not covering her face as Sister Hedwic had done, but staring ahead with her wide eyes as if she were blind or could see something we could not. The Abbess knelt down and embraced her, rocking her back and forth, saying, "Yes, yes, dear, but we are here; we are here now; that is gone now," but Sibihd continued to scream, covering her ears as if the scream were someone else's and she could hide herself from it.

Thorvald said, looking, I thought, a little uncomfortable, "Cannot your Christ cure this?"

"No," said the Abbess. "Only by undoing the past. And that is the one thing He never does, it seems. She is in Hell now and must go back there many times before she can forget."

"She would make a bad slave," said the Norseman, with a glance at Sister Sibihd, who had fallen silent and was staring ahead of her again. "You need not fear that anyone will want her."

"God," said the Abbess Radegunde

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calmly, "is merciful."

Thorvald Einarsson said, "Abbess, I am not a bad man."

"For a good man," said the Abbess Radegunde, "you keep surprisingly bad company."

He said angrily, "I did not choose my shipmates. I have had bad luck!"

"Ours has," said the Abbess, "been worse, I think."

"Luck is luck," said Thorvald, clenching his fists. "It comes to some folk and not to others."

"As you came to us," said the Abbess mildly. "Yes, yes, I see, Thorvald Einarsson; one may say that luck is Thor's doing or Odin's doing, but you must know that our bad luck is your own doing and not some god's. You are our bad luck, Thorvald Einarsson. It's true that you're not as wicked as your friends, for they kill for pleasure and you do it without feeling, as a business, the way one hews down grain. Perhaps you have seen today some of the grain you have cut. If you had a man's soul, you would not have gone *viking*, luck or no luck, and if your soul were bigger still, you would have tried to stop your shipmates, just as I talk honestly to you now, despite your anger, and just as Christus himself told the truth and was nailed on the cross. If you were a beast you could not break God's law, and if you were a man you would not, but you are neither, and that makes you a kind of monster that spoils everything it touches and never knows the reason, and that is why I will never forgive you until you become a man, a true man with a true soul. As for your friends—"

Here Thorvald Einarsson struck the Abbess on the face with his open hand and knocked her down. I heard Sister Hedwic gasp in horror and behind us Sister Sibihd began to moan. But the Abbess only sat there, rubbing her jaw and smiling a little. Then she said:

"Oh, dear, have I been at it again? I am ashamed of myself. You are quite right to be angry, Torvald; no one can stand me when I go on in that way, least of all myself; it is such a bore. Still, I cannot seem to stop it; I am too used to being the Abbess Radegunde, that is clear. I promise never to torment you again, but you, Thorvald, must never strike me again, because you will be very sorry if you do."

He took a step forward.

"No, no, my dear man," the Abbess said merrily, "I mean no threat — how could I threaten you? — I mean only that I will never tell you any jokes, my spirits will droop, and I will become as dull as any other woman. Confess it now: I am the most interesting thing that has happened to you in years and I have entertained you better, sharp tongue and all, than all the *skalds* at the Court of Norway. And I know more tales and stories than they do — more than anyone in the whole world — for I make new ones when the old ones wear out.

"Shall I tell you a story now?"

"About your Christ?" said he, the

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anger still in his face.

"No," said she, "about living men and women. Tell me, Torvald what do you men want from us women?"

"To be talked to death," said he, and I could see there was some anger in him still, but he was turning it to play also.

The Abbess laughed in delight. "Very witty!" she said, springing to her feet and brushing the leaves off her skirt. "You are a very clever man, Torvald. I beg your pardon, Thorvald. I keep forgetting. But as to what men want from women, if you asked the young men, they would only wink and dig one another in the ribs, but that is only how they deceive themselves. That is only body calling to body. They want something quite different and they want it so much that it frightens them. So they pretend it is anything and everything else: pleasure, comfort, a servant in the home. Do you know what it is that they want?"

"What?" said Thorvald.

"The mother," said Radegunde, "as women do, too; we all want the mother. When I walked before you on the riverbank yesterday, I was playing the mother. Now you did nothing, for you are no young fool, but I knew that sooner or later one of you, so tormented by his longing that he would hate me for it, would reveal himself. And so he did: Thorfinn, with his thoughts all mixed up between witches and grannies and what not. I knew I could frighten him, and through him, most of you. That was the beginning of my bargaining. You Norse have too much of the father in your country and not enough mother; that is why you die so well and kill other folk so well — and live so very, very badly."

"You are doing it again," said Thorvald, but I think he wanted to listen all the same.

"Your pardon, friend," said the Abbess. "You are brave men; I don't deny it. But I know your *sagas* and they are all about fighting and dying and afterwards not Heavenly happiness but the end of the world: everything, even the gods, eaten by the Fenris Wolf and the Midgaard snake! What a pity, to die bravely only because life is not worth living! The Irish know better. The pagan Irish were heroes, with their Queens leading them to battle as often as not, and Father Cairbre, God rest his soul, was complaining only two days ago that the common Irish folk were blasphemously making a goddess out of God's mother, for do they build shrines to Christ or Our Lord or pray to them? No! It is Our Lady of the Rocks and Our Lady of the Sea and Our Lady of the Grove and Our Lady of this or that from one end of the land to the other. And even here it is only the Abbey folk who speak of God the Father and of Christ. In the village if one is sick or another in trouble it is: Holy Mother, save me! and: *Miriam Virginem*, intercede for me, and: Blessed Virgin, blind my husband's eyes! and: Our Lady, preserve my crops,

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and so on, men and women both. We all need the mother."

"You, too?"

"More than most," said the Abbess.

"And I?"

"Oh, no," said the Abbess, stopping suddenly, for we had all been walking back towards the village as she spoke. "No, and that is what drew me to you at once. I saw it in you and knew you were the leader. It is followers who make leaders, you know, and your shipmates have made you leader, whether you know it or not. What you want is — how shall I say it? You are a clever man, Thorvald, perhaps the cleverest man I have ever met, more even than the scholars I knew in my youth. But your cleverness has had no food. It is a cleverness of the world and not of books. You want to travel and know about folk and their customs, and what strange places are like, and what has happened to men and women in the past. If you take me to Constantinople, it will not be to get a price for me but merely to go there; you went seafaring because this longing itched at you until you could bear it not a year more; I know that."

"Then you are a witch," said he, and he was not smiling.

"No, I only saw what was in your face when you spoke of that city," said she. "Also there is gossip that you spent much time in Göteborg as a young man, idling and marveling at the ships and markets when you should have been at your farm."

She said, "Thorvald, I can feed that cleverness. I am the wisest woman in the world. I know everything — everything! I know more than my teachers; I make it up or it comes to me, I don't know how, but it is real — real! — and I know more than anyone. Take me from here, as your slave it you wish but as your friend also, and let us go to Constantinople and see the domes of gold, and the walls all inlaid with gold, and the people so wealthy you cannot imagine it, and the whole city so gilded it seems to be on fire, pictures as high as a wall, set right in the wall and all made of jewels so there is nothing else like them, redder than the reddest rose, greener than the grass, and with a blue that makes the sky pale!"

"You are indeed a witch," said he, "and not the Abbess Radegunde."

She said slowly, "I think I am forgetting how to be the Abbess Radegunde."

"Then you will not care about them any more," said he, and pointed to Sister Hedwic, who was still leading the stumbling Sister Sibihd.

The Abbess's face was still and mild. She said, "I care. Do not strike me, Thorvald, not ever again, and I will be a good friend to you. Try to control the worst of your men and leave as many of my people free as you can — I know them and will tell you which can be taken away with the least hurt to themselves or others — and I will feed that curiosity and cleverness of yours until you will not recognize

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this old world any more for the sheer wonder and awe of it; I swear this on my life."

"Done," said he, adding, "but with my luck, your life is somewhere else, locked in a box on top of a mountain, like the troll's in the story, or you will die of old age while we are still at sea."

"Nonsense," she said, "I am a healthy, mortal woman with all my teeth, and I mean to gather many wrinkles yet."

He put his hand out and she took it; then he said, shaking his head in wonder, "If I sold you in Constantinople, within a year you would become Queen of the place!"

The Abbess laughed merrily and I cried in fear, "Me, too! Take me too!" and she said "Oh, yes, we must not forget little Boy News," and lifted me into her arms.

The frightening, tall man, with his face close to mine, said in his strange, sing-song German:

"Boy, would you like to see the whales leaping in the open sea and the seals barking on the rocks? And cliffs so high that a giant could stretch his arms up and not reach their tops? And the sun shining at midnight?"

"Yes!" said I.

"But you will be a slave," he said, "and may be ill-treated and will always have to do as you are bid. Would you like that?"

"No!" I cried lustily, from the safety of the Abbess's arms, "I'll fight!"

He laughed a mighty, roaring laugh and tousled my head — rather too hard, I thought — and said, "I will not be a bad master, for I am named for Thor Red-beard and he is strong and quick to fight but good-natured, too, and so am I," and the Abbess put me down, and so we walked back to the village, Thorvald and the Abbess Radegunde talking of the glories of this world and Sister Hedwic saying softly, "She is a saint, our Abbess, a saint, to sacrifice herself for the good of the people," and all the time behind us, like a memory, came the low, witless sobbing of Sister Sibihd, who was in Hell.

When we got back we found that Thorfinn was better and the Norsemen were to leave in the morning. Thorvald had a second pallet brought into the Abbess's study and slept on the floor with us that night. You might think his men would laugh at this, for the Abbess was an old woman, but I think he had been with one of the young ones before he came to us. He had that look about him. There was no bedding for the Abbess but an old brown cloak with holes in it, and she and I were wrapped in it when he came in and threw himself down, whistling, on the other pallet. Then he said:

"Tomorrow, before we sail, you will show me the old Abbess's treasure."

"No," said she. "That agreement was broken."

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He had been playing with his knife and now ran his thumb along the edge of it. "I can make you do it."

"No," said she patiently, "and now I am going to sleep."

"So you make light of death?" he said. "Good! That is what a brave woman should do, as the *skalds* sing, and not move, even when the keen sword cuts off her eyelashes. But what if I put this knife here not to your throat but to your little boy's? You would tell me then quick enough!"

The Abbess turned away from him, yawning and saying, "No, Thorvald, because you would not. And if you did, I would despise you for a cowardly oath-breaker and not tell you for that reason. Good night."

He laughed and whistled again for a bit. Then he said:

"Was all that true?"

"All what?" said the Abbess., "Oh, about the statue. Yes, but there was no ravisher. I put him in the tale for poor Sister Hedwic."

Thorvald snorted, as if in disappointment. "Tale? You tell lies, Abbess!"

The Abbess drew the old brown cloak over her head and closed her eyes. "It helped her."

Then there was a silence, but the big Norseman did not seem able to lie still. He shifted his body again as if the straw bothered him, and again turned over. He finally burst out, "But what happened!"

She sat up. Then she shut her eyes. She said, "Maybe it does not come into your man's thoughts that an old woman gets tired and that the work of dealing with folk is hard work, or even that it is work at all. Well!

"Nothing 'happened,' Thorvald. Must something happen only if this one fucks that one or one bangs in another's head? I desired my statue to the point of such foolishness that I determined to find a real, human lover, but when I raised my eyes from my fancies to the real, human men of Rome and unstopped my ears to listen to their talk, I realized that the thing was completely and eternally impossible. Oh, those younger sons with their skulking, jealous hatred of the rich, and the rich ones with their noses in the air because they thought themselves of such great consequence because of their silly money, and the timidity of the priests to their superiors, and their superiors' pride, and the artisans' hatred of the peasants, and the peasants being worked like animals from morning until night, and half the men I saw beating their wives and the other half out to cheat some poor girl of her money or her virginity or both — this was enough to put out any fire! And the women doing less harm only because they had less power to do harm, or so it seemed to me then. So I put all away, as one does with any disappointment. Men are not such bad folk when one stops expecting them to be gods, but they are not for me. If that state is chastity, then a weak

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stomach is temperance, I think. But whatever it is, I have it, and that's the end of the matter."

"*All* men?" said Thorvald Einarsson with his head to one side, and it came to me that he had been drinking, though he seemed sober.

"Thorvald," said the Abbess, "what you want with this middle-aged wreck of a body I cannot imagine, but if you lust after my wrinkles and flabby breasts and lean, withered flanks, do whatever you want quickly and then, for Heaven's sake, let me sleep. I am tired to death."

He said in a low voice, "I need to have power over you."

She spread her hands in a helpless gesture. "Oh, Thorvald, Thorvald, I am a weak little woman over forty years old! Where is the power? All I can do is talk!"

He said, "That's it. That's how you do it. You talk and talk and talk and everyone does just as you please; I have seen it!"

The Abbess said, looking sharply at him, "Very well. If you must. *But if I were you, Norseman, I would as soon bed my own mother.* Remember that as you pull my skirts up."

That stopped him. He swore under his breath, turning over on his side, away from us. Then he thrust his knife into the edge of his pallet, time after time. Then he put the knife under the rolled-up cloth he was using as a pillow. We had no pillow and so I tried to make mine out of the edge of the cloak and failed. Then I thought that the Norseman was afraid of God working in Radegunde, and then I thought of Sister Hedwic's changing color and wondered why. And then I thought of the leaping whales and the seals, which must be like great dogs because of the barking, and then the seals jumped on land and ran to my pallet and lapped at me with great, icy tongues of water so that I shivered and jumped, and then I woke up.

The Abbess Radegunde had left the pallet — it was her warmth I had missed — and was walking about the room. She would step and pause, her skirts making a small noise as she did so. She was careful not to touch the sleeping Thorvald. There was a dim light in the room from the embers that still glowed under the ashes in the hearth, but no light came from between the shutters of the study window, now shut against the cold. I saw the Abbess kneel under the plain wooden cross which hung on the study wall and heard her say a few words in Latin; I thought she was praying. But then she said in a low voice:

"'Do not call upon Apollo and the Muses, for they are deaf things and vain.' But so are you, Pierced Man, deaf and vain."

Then she got up and began to pace again. Thinking of it now frightens me, for it was the middle of the night and no one to hear her — except me, but she thought I was asleep — and yet she went on and on in that low, even voice

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as if it were broad day and she were explaining something to someone, as if things that had been in her thoughts for years must finally come out. But I did not find anything alarming in it then, for I thought that perhaps all Abbesses had to do such things, and besides she did not seem angry or hurried or afraid; she sounded as calm as if she were discussing the profits from the Abbey's bee-keeping — which I had heard her do — or the accounts for the wine cellars — which I had also heard — and there was nothing alarming in that. So I listened as she continued walking about the room in the dark. She said:

"Talk, talk, talk, and always to myself. But one can't abandon the kittens and puppies; that would be cruel. And being the Abbess Radegunde at least gives one something to do. But I am so sick of the good Abbess Radegunde; I have put on Radegunde every morning of my life as easily as I put on my smock, and then I have had to hear the stupid creature praised all day! — sainted Radegunde, just Radegunde who is never angry or greedy or jealous, kindly Radegunde who sacrifices herself for others, and always the talk, talk, talk, bubbling and boiling in my head with no one to hear or understand, and no one to answer. No, not even in the south, only a line here or a line there, and all written by the dead. Did they feel as I do? That the world is a giant nursery full of squabbles over toys and the babes thinking me some kind of goddess because I'm not greedy for their dolls or bits of straw or their horses made of tied-together sticks?

"Poor people, if only they knew! It's so easy to be temperate when one enjoys nothing, so easy to be kind when one loves nothing, so easy to be fearless when one's life is no better than one's death. And so easy to scheme when the success doesn't matter.

"Would they be surprised, I wonder, to find out what my real thoughts were when Thorfinn's knife was at my throat? Curiosity! But he would not do it, of course; he does everything for show. And they would think I was twice holy, not to care about death.

"Then why not kill yourself, impious Sister Radegunde? Is it your religion which stops you? Oh, you mean the holy wells, and the holy trees, and the blessed saints with their blessed relics, and the stupidity that shamed Sister Hedwic, and the promises of safety that drove poor Sibihd mad when the blessed body of her Lord did not protect her and the blessed love of the blessed Mary turned away the sharp point of not one knife? Trash! Idle leaves and sticks, reeds and rushes, filth we sweep off our floors when it grows too thick. As if holiness had anything to do with all of that. As if every place were not as holy as every other and every thing as holy as every other, from the shit in Thorfinn's bowels to the rocks on the ground. As

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if all places and things were not clouds placed in front of our weak eyes, to keep us from being blinded by that glory, that eternal shining, that blazing all about us, the torrent of light that is everything and is in everything! That is what keeps me from the river, but it never speaks to me or tells me what to do, and to it good and evil are the same — no, it is something else than good or evil; it *is*, only — so it is not God. That I know.

"So, people, is your Radegunde a witch or a demon? Is she full of pride or is Radegunde abject? Perhaps she is a witch. Once, long ago, I confessed to old Gerbertus that I could see things that were far away merely by closing my eyes, and I proved it to him, too, and he wept over me and gave me much penance, crying, "If it come of itself it may be a gift of God, daughter, but it is more likely the work of a demon, so do not do it!" And then we prayed-and I told him the power had left me, to make the poor old puppy less troubled in its mind, but that was not true, of course. I could still see Turkey as easily as I could see him, and places far beyond: the squat, wild men of the plains on their ponies, and the strange, tall people beyond that with their great cities and odd eyes, as if one pulled one's eyelid up on a slant, and then the seas with the great, wild lands and the cities more full of gold than Constantinople, and water again until one comes back home, for the world's a ball, as the ancients said.

"But I did stop somehow, over the years. Radegunde never had time, I suppose. Besides, when I opened that door it was only pictures, as in a book, and all to no purpose, and after a while I had seen them all and no longer cared for them. It is the other door that draws me, when it opens itself but a crack and strange things peep through, like Ranulf sister's son and the name of his horse. That door is good but very heavy; it always swings back after a little. I shall have to be on my deathbed to open it all the way, I think.

"The fox is asleep. He is the cleverest yet; there is something in him so that at times one can almost talk to him. But still a fox, for the most part. Perhaps in time....

"But let me see; yes, he is asleep. And the Sibihd puppy is asleep, though it will be having a bad dream soon, I think, and the Thorfinn kitten is asleep, as full of fright as when it wakes, with its claws going in and out, in and out, lest something strangle it in its sleep."

Then the Abbess fell silent and moved to the shuttered window as if she were looking out, so I thought that she was indeed looking out — but not with her eyes — at all the sleeping folk, and this was something she had done every night of her life to see if they were safe and sound. But would she not know that *I* was awake? Should I not try very hard to get to sleep before she caught me? Then it seemed to me that she smiled in the dark, although I

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could not see it. She said in that same low, even voice: "Sleep or wake, Boy News; it is all one to me. Thou hast heard nothing of any importance, only the silly Abbess talking to herself, only Radegunde saying good-bye to Radegunde, only Radegunde going away — don't cry, Boy News; I am still here — but there: Radegunde has gone. This Norseman and I are alike in one way: our minds are like great houses with many of the rooms locked shut. We crowd in a miserable, huddled few, like poor folk, when we might move freely among them all, as gracious as princes. It is fate that locked away so much of the Norseman — see, Boy News, I do not say his name, not even softly, for that wakes folks — but I wonder if the one who bolted me in was not Radegunde herself, she and old Gerbertus — whom I partly believed — they and the years and years of having to be Radegunde and do the things Radegunde did and pretend to have the thoughts Radegunde had and the endless, endless lies Radegunde must tell everyone, and Radegunde's utter and unbearable loneliness."

She fell silent again. I wondered at the Abbess's talk this time: saying she was not there when she was, and about living locked up in small rooms — for surely the Abbey was the most splendid house in all the world, and the biggest — and how could she be lonely when all the folk loved her? But then she said in a voice so low that I could hardly hear it:

"Poor Radegunde! So weary of the lies she tells and the fooling of men and women with the collars round their necks and bribes of food for good behavior and a careful twitch of the leash that they do not even see or feel. And with the Norseman it will be all the same: lies and flattery and all of it work that never ends and no one ever even sees, so that finally Radegunde will lie down like an ape in a cage, weak and sick from hunger, and will never get up.

"Let her die now. There: Radegunde is dead. Radegunde is gone. Perhaps the door was heavy only because she was on the other side of it, pushing against me. Perhaps it will open all the way now. I have looked in all directions: to the east, to the north and south, and to the west, but there is one place I have never looked and now I will: away from the ball, straight out. Let us see—"

She stopped speaking all of a sudden. I had been falling asleep but this silence woke me. Then I heard the Abbess gasp terribly, like one mortally stricken, and then she said in a whisper so keen and thrilling that it made the hair stand up on my head: *Where art thou?* The next moment she had torn the shutters open and was crying out with all her voice: *Help me! Find me! Oh, come, come, come, or I die!*

This waked Thorvald. With some Norse oath he stumbled up and flung on his sword belt and then put his hand to his dagger; I had noticed this thing

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with the dagger was a thing Norsemen liked to do. The Abbess was silent. He let out his breath in an oof! and went to light the tallow dip at the live embers under the hearth ashes; when the dip had smoked up, he put it on its shelf on the wall.

He said in German, "What the devil, woman! What has happened?"

She turned round. She looked as if she could not see us, as if she had been dazed by a joy too big to hold, like one who has looked into the sun and is still dazzled by it so that everything seems changed, and the world seems all God's and everything in it like Heaven. She said softly, with her arms around herself, hugging herself: "My people. The real people."

"What are you talking of!" said he.

She seemed to see him then, but only as Sibihd had beheld us; I do not mean in horror as Sibihd had, but beholding through something else, like someone who comes from a vision of bliss which still lingers about her. She said in the same soft voice, "They are coming for me, Thorvald. Is it not wonderful? I knew all this year that something would happen, but I did not know it would be the one thing I wanted in all the world."

He grasped his hair. "*Who* is coming?"

"My people," she said, laughing softly. "Do you not feel them? I do. We must wait three days for they come from very far away. But then — oh, you will see!"

He said, "You've been dreaming. We sail tomorrow."

"Oh, no," said the Abbess simply. "you cannot do that for it would not be right. They told me to wait; they said if I went away, they might not find me."

He said slowly, "You've gone mad. Or it's a trick."

"Oh, no, Thorvald," said she. "How could I trick you? I am your friend. And you will wait these three days, will you not, because you are my friend also."

"You're mad," he said, and started for the door of the study, but she stepped in front of him and threw herself on her knees. All her cunning seemed to have deserted her, or perhaps it was Radegunde who had been the cunning one. This one was like a child. She clasped her hands and tears came out of her eyes; she begged him, saying:

"Such a little thing, Thorvald, only three days! And if they do not come, why then we will go anywhere you like, but if they do come you will not regret it, I promise you; they are not like the folk here and that place is like nothing here. It is what the soul craves, Thorvald!"

He said, "Get up, woman for God's sake!"

She said, smiling in a sly, frightened way through her blubbered face, "If you let me stay, I will show you the old Abbess's buried threasure, Thorvald."

He stepped back, the anger clear in

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him. "So this is the brave old witch who cares nothing for death!" he said. Then he made for the door, but she was up again, as quick as a snake, and had flung herself across it.

She said, still with that strange innocence, "Do not strike me. Do not push me. I am your friend!"

He said, "You mean that you lead me by a string around the neck, like a goose. Well, I am tired of that!"

"But I cannot do that any more," said the Abbess breathlessly, "not since the door opened. I am not able now." He raised his arm to strike her and she cowered, wailing, "Do not strike me! Do not push me! Do not, Thorvald!"

He said, "Out of my way then, old witch!"

She began to cry in sobs and gulps. She said, "One is here but another will come! One is buried but another will rise! She will come, Thorvald!" and then in a low, quick voice, "Do not push open this last door. There is one behind it who is evil and I am afraid—" but one could see that he was angry and disappointed and would not listen. He struck her for the second time and again she fell, but with a desperate cry, covering her face with her hands. He unbolted the door and stepped over her and I heard his footsteps go down the corridor. I could see the Abbess clearly — at that time I did not wonder how this could be, with the shadows from the tallow dip half hiding everything in their drunken dance — but I saw every line in her face as if it had been full day, and in that light I saw Radegunde go away from us at last.

Have you ever been at some great king's court or some earl's and heard the storytellers? There are those so skilled in the art that they not only speak for you what the person in the tale said and did, but they also make an action with their faces and bodies as if they truly were that man or woman, so that it is a great surprise to you when the tale ceases, for you almost believe that you have seen the tale happen in front of your very eyes, and it is as if a real man or woman had suddenly ceased to exist, for you forget that all this was only a teller and a tale.

So it was with the woman who had been Radegunde. She did not change; it was still Radegunde's gray hairs and wrinkled face and old body in the peasant woman's brown dress, and yet at the same time it was a stranger who stepped out of the Abbess Radegunde as out of a gown dropped to the floor. This stranger was without feeling, though Radegunde's tears still stood on her cheeks, and there was no kindness or joy in her. She got up without taking care of her dress where the dirty rushes stuck to it; it was as if the dress were an accident and did not concern her. She said in a voice I had never heard before, one with no feeling in it, as if I did not concern her, or Thorvald Einarsson either, as if neither of us were worth a second glance:

"Thorvald, turn around."

Far up in the hall something stirred.

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"Now come back. This way."

There were footsteps, coming closer. Then the big Norseman walked clumsily into the room — jerk! jerk! jerk! at every step as if he were being pulled by a rope. Sweat beaded his face. He said, "You — how?"

"By my nature," she said. "Put up your right arm, fox. Now the left. Now both down. Good."

"You — troll!" he said.

"That is so," she said. "Now listen to me, you. There's a man inside you but he's not worth getting at; I tried moments ago when I was new-hatched and he's buried too deep, but now I have grown beak and claws and care nothing for him. It's almost dawn and your boys are stirring; you will go out and tell them that we must stay here another three days. You are weather-wise; make up some story they will believe. And don't try to tell anyone what happened here tonight; you will find that you cannot."

"Folk — come," said he, trying to turn his head, but the effort only made him sweat.

She raised her eyebrows. "Why should they? No one has heard anything. Nothing has happened. You will go out and be as you always are and I will play Radegunde. For three days only. Then you are free."

He did not move. One could see that to remain still was very hard for him; the sweat poured and he strained until every muscle stood out. She said:

"Fox, don't hurt yourself. And don't push me; I am not fond of you. My hand is light upon you only because you still seem to me a little less unhuman than the rest; do not force me to make it heavier. To be plain: I have just broken Thorfinn's neck, for I find that the change improves him. Do not make me do the same to you."

"No worse — than death," Thorvald brought out.

"Ah, no?" said she, and in a moment he was screaming and clawing at his eyes. She said, "Open them, open them; your sight is back," and then, "I do not wish to bother myself thinking up worse things, like worms in your guts. Or do you wish dead sons and a dead wife? Now go.

"As you always do," she added sharply, and the big man turned and walked out. One could not have told from looking at him that anything was wrong.

I had not been sorry to see such a bad man punished, one whose friends had killed our folk and would have taken for slaves — and yet I was sorry, too, in a way, because of the seals barking and the whales — and he *was* splendid, after a fashion — and yet truly I forgot all about that the moment he was gone, for I was terrified of this strange person or demon or whatever it was, for I knew that whoever was in the room with me was not the Abbess Radegunde. I knew also that it could tell where I was and what I was doing, even if I made no sound, and was in a terrible riddle as to what I ought to do

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when soft fingers touched my face. It was the demon, reaching swiftly and silently behind her.

And do you know, all of a sudden everything was all right! I don't mean that she was the Abbess again — I still had very serious suspicions about that — but all at once I felt light as air and nothing seemed to matter very much because my stomach was full of bubbles of happiness, just as if I had been drunk, only nicer. If the Abbess Radegunde were really a demon, what a joke that was on her people! And she did not, now that I came to think of it, seem a bad sort of demon, more the frightening kind than the killing kind, except for Thorfinn, of course, but then Thorfinn had been a very wicked man. And did not the angels of the Lord smite down the wicked? So perhaps the Abbess was an angel of the Lord and not a demon, but if she were truly an angel, why had she not smitten the Norsemen down when they first came and so saved all our folk? And then I thought that whether angel or demon, she was no longer the Abbess and would love me no longer, and if I had not been so full of the silly happiness which kept tickling about inside me, this thought would have made me weep.

I said, "Will the bad Thorvald get free, demon?"

"No," she said. "Not even if I sleep."

I thought: *But she does not love me.*

"I love thee," said the strange voice, but it was not the Abbess Radegunde's and so was without meaning, but again those soft fingers touched me and there was some kindness in them, even if it was a stranger's kindness.

Sleep, they said.

So I did.

The next three days I had much secret mirth to see the folk bow down to the demon and kiss its hands and weep over it because it had sold itself to ransom them. That is what Sister Hedwic told them. Young Thorfinn had gone out in the night to piss and had fallen over a stone in the dark and broken his neck, which secretly rejoiced our folk, but his comrades did not seem to mind much either, save for one young fellow who had been Throfinn's friend, I think, and so went about with a long face. Thorvald locked me up in the Abbess's study with the demon every night and went out — or so folk said — to one of the young women, but on those nights the demon was silent, and I lay there with the secret tickle of merriment in my stomach, caring about nothing.

On the third morning I woke sober. The demon — or the Abbess — for in the day she was so like the Abbess Radegunde that I wondered — took my hand and walked us up to Thorvald, who was out picking the people to go aboard the Norseman's boats at the riverbank to be slaves. Folk were standing about weeping and wringing their hands; I thought this strange

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because of the Abbess's promise to pick those whose going would hurt least, but I know now that least is not none. The weather was bad, cold rain out of mist, and some of Thorvald's companions were speaking sourly to him in the Norse, but he talked them down — bluff and hearty — as if making light of the weather. The demon stood by him and said, in German, in a low voice so that none might hear: "You will say we go to find the Abbess's treasure and then you will go with us into the woods."

He spoke to his fellows in Norse and they frowned, but the end of it was that two must come with us, for the demon said it was such a treasure as three might carry. The demon had the voice and manner of the Abbess Radegunde, all smiles, so they were fooled. Thus we started out into the trees behind the village, with the rain worse and the ground beginning to soften underfoot. As soon as the village was out of sight, the two Norsemen fell behind, but Thorvald did not seem to notice this; I looked back and saw the first man standing in the mud with one foot up, like a goose, and the second with his head lifted and his mouth open so that the rain fell in it. We walked on, the earth sucking at our shoes and all of us getting wet: Thorvald's hair stuck fast aginast his face, and the demon's old brown cloak clinging to its body. Then suddenly the demon began to breathe harshly and it put its hand to its side with a cry. Its cloak fell off and it stumbled before us between the wet trees, not weeping but breathing hard. Then I saw, ahead of us through the pelting rain, a kind of shining among the bare tree trunks, and as we came nearer the shining became more clear until it was very plain to see, not a blazing thing like a fire at night but a mild and even brightness as though the sunlight were coming through the clouds pleasantly but without strength, as it often does at the beginning of the year.

And then there were folk inside the brightness, both men and women, all dressed in white, and they held out their arms to us, and the demon ran to them, crying out loudly and weeping but paying no mind to the tree branches which struck it across the face and body. Sometimes it fell but it quickly got up again. When it reached the strange folk they embraced it, and I thought that the filth and mud of its gown would stain their white clothing, but the foulness dropped off and would not cling to those clean garments. None of the strange folk spoke a word, nor did the Abbess — I knew then that she was no demon, whatever she was — but I felt them talk to one another, as if in my mind, although I know not how this could be nor the sense of what they said. An odd thing was that as I came closer I could see they were not standing on the ground, as in the way of nature, but higher up, inside the shining, and that their white robes were nothing at

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all like ours, for they clung to the body so that one might see the people's legs all the way up to the place where the legs joined, even the women's. And some of the folk were like us, but most had a darker color, and some looked as if they had been smeared with soot — there are such persons in the far parts of the world, you know, as I found out later; it is their own natural color — and there were some with the odd eyes the Abbess had spoken of — but the oddest thing of all I will not tell you now. When the Abbess had embraced and kissed them all and all had wept, she turned and looked down upon us: Thorvald standing there as if held by a rope and I, who had lost my fear and had crept close in pure awe, for there was such a joy about these people, like the light about them, mild as spring light and yet as strong as in a spring where the winter has gone forever.

"Come to me, Thorvald," said the Abbess, and one could not see from her face if she loved or hated him. He moved closer — jerk! jerk! — and she reached down and touched his forehead with her fingertips, at which one side of his lip lifted, as a dog's does when it snarls.

"As thou knowest," said the Abbess quietly, "I hate thee and would be revenged upon thee. Thus I swore to myself three days ago, and such vows are not lightly broken."

I saw him snarl again and he turned his eyes from her.

"I must go soon," said the Abbess, unmoved, "for I could stay here long years only as Radegunde, and Radegunde is no more; none of us can remain here long as our proper selves or even in our true bodies, for if we do we go mad like Sibihd or walk into the river and drown or stop our own hearts, so miserable, wicked, and brutish does your world seem to us. Nor may we come in large companies, for we are few and our strength is not great and we have much to learn and study of thy folk so that we may teach and help without marring all in our ignorance. And ignorant or wise, we can do naught except thy folk aid us.

"Here is my revenge," said the Abbess, and he seemed to writhe under the touch of her fingers, for all they were so light. "Henceforth be not Thorvald Farmer nor yet Thorvald Seafarer but Thorvald Peacemaker, Thorvald War-hater, put into anguish by bloodshed and agonized at cruelty. I cannot make long thy life — that gift is beyond me — but I give thee this: to the end of thy days, long or short, thou wilt know the Presence about thee always, as I do, and thou wilt know that it is neither good nor evil, as I do, and this knowing will trouble and frighten thee always, as it does me, and so about this one thing, as about many another, Thorvald Peacemaker will never have peace.

"Now, Thorvald, go back to the village and tell thy comrades I was assumed into the company of the saints, straight up to Heaven. Thou mayst be-

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lieve it, if thou wilt. That is all my revenge."

Then she took away her hand, and he turned and walked from us like a man in a dream, holding out his hands as if to feel the rain and stumbling now and again, as one who wakes from a vision.

Then I began to grieve, for I knew she would be going away with the strange people, and it was to me as if all the love and care and light in the world were leaving me. I crept close to her, meaning to spring secretly onto the shining place and so go away with them, but she spied me and said, "Silly Radulphus, you cannot," and that *you* hurt me more than anything else so that I began to bawl.

"Child," said the Abbess, "come to me," and loudly weeping I leaned against her knees. I felt the shining around me, all bright and good and warm, that wiped away all grief, and then the Abbess's touch on my hair.

She said, "Remember me. And be ... content."

I nodded, wishing I dared to look up at her face, but when I did, she had already gone with her friends. Not up into the sky, you understand, but as if they moved very swiftly backwards among the trees — although the trees were still behind them somehow — and as they moved, the shining and the people faded away into the rain until there was nothing left.

Then there was no rain. I do not mean that the clouds parted or the sun came out; I mean that one moment it was raining and cold and the next the sky was clear blue from side to side, and it was splendid, sunny, breezy, bright, sailing weather. I had the oddest thought that the strange folk were not agreed about doing such a big miracle — and it was hard for them, too — but they had decided that no one would believe this more than all the other miracles folk speak of, I suppose. And it would surely make Thorvald's lot easier when he came back with wild words about saints and Heaven, as indeed it did, later.

Well, that is the tale, really. She said to me "Be content" and so I am; they call me Radulf the Happy now. I have had my share of trouble and sickness, but always somewhere in me there is a little spot of warmth and joy to make it all easier, like a traveler's fire burning out in the wilderness on a cold night. When I am in real sorrow or distress, I remember her fingers touching my hair and that takes part of the pain away, somehow. So perhaps I got the best gift, after all. And she said also, "Remember me," and thus I have, every little thing, although it all happened when I was the age my own grandson is now, and that is how I can tell you this tale today.

And the rest? Three days after the Norsemen left, Sibihd got back her wits and no one knew how, though I think I do! And as for Thorvald Einarsson, I have heard that after his wife died in Norway he went to England

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and ended his days there as a monk, but whether this story be true or not I do not know.

I know this: they may call me Happy Radulf all they like, but there is much that troubles me. Was the Abbess Radegunde a demon, as the new priest says? I cannot believe this; although he called half her sayings nonsense and the other half blasphemy when I asked him. Father Cairbre, before the Norse killed him, told us stories about the Sidhe, that is, the Irish fairy people, who leave changelings in human cradles; and for a while it seemed to me that Radegunde must be a woman of the Sidhe when I remembered that she could read Latin at the age of two and was such a marvel of learning when so young, for the changelings the fairies leave are not their own children, you understand, but one of the fairy folk themselves, who are hundreds upon hundreds of years old, and the other fairy folk always come back for their own in the end. And yet this could not have been, for Father Cairbre said also that the Sidhe are wanton and cruel and without souls, and neither the Abbess Radegunde nor the people who came for her were one blessed bit like that, although she did break Thorfinn's neck — but then it may be that Thorfinn broke his own neck by chance, just as we all thought at the time, and she told this to Thorvald afterwards, as if she had done it herself, only to frighten him. She had more of a soul with a soul's griefs and joys than most of us, no matter what the new priest says. He never saw her or felt her sorrow and lonesomeness, or heard her talk of the blazing light all around us — and what can that be but God Himself? Even though she did call the crucifix a deaf thing and vain, she must have meant not Christ, you see, but only the piece of wood itself, for she was always telling the Sisters that Christ was in Heaven and not on the wall. And if she said the light was not good or evil, well, there is a traveling Irish scholar who told me of a holy Christian monk named Augustinus who tells us that all which is, is good, and evil is only a lack of the good, like an empty place not filled up. And if the Abbess truly said there was no God, I say it was the sin of despair, and even saints may sin, if only they repent, which I believe she did at the end.

So I tell myself, and yet I know the Abbess Radegunde was no saint, for are the saints few and weak, as she said? Surely not! And then there is a thing I held back in my telling, a small thing, and it will make you laugh and perhaps means nothing one way or the other, but it is this:

Are the saints bald?

These folk in white had young faces but they were like eggs; there was not a stitch of hair on their domes! Well, God may shave His saints if He pleases, I suppose.

But I know she was no saint. And then I believe that she did kill Thorfinn

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and the light was not God and she not even a Christian or maybe even human, and I remember how Radegunde was to her only a gown to step out of at will, and how she truly hated and scorned Thorvald until she was happy and safe with her own people. Or perhaps it was like her talk about living in a house with the rooms shut up; when she stopped being Radegunde, first one part of her came back and then the other — the joyful part that could not lie or plan and then the angry part — and then they were all together when she was back among her own folk. And then I give up trying to weigh this matter and go back to warm my soul at the little fire she lit in me, that one warm, bright place in the wide and windy dark.

But something troubles me even there and will not be put to rest by the memory of the Abbess's touch on my hair. As I grow older it troubles me more and more. It was the very last thing she said to me, which I have not told you but will now. When she had given me the gift of contentment, I became so happy that I said, "Abbess, you said you would be revenged on Thorvald, but all you did was change him into a good man. That is no revenge!"

What this saying did to her astonished me, for all the color went out of her face and left it gray. She looked suddenly old, like a death's-head, even standing there among her own true folk with love and joy coming from them so strongly that I myself might feel it. She said, "I did not change him. I lent him my eyes, that is all." Then she looked beyond me, as if at our village, at the Norsemen loading their boats with weeping slaves, at all the villages of Germany and England and France where the poor folk sweat from dawn to dark so that the great lords may do battle with one another, at castles under siege with the starving folk within eating mice and rats and sometimes each other, at the women carried off or raped or beaten, at the mothers wailing for their little ones, and beyond this at the great wide world itself with all its battles which I had used to think so grand, and the misery and greediness and fear and jealousy and hatred of folk one for the other, save — perhaps — for a few small bands of savages, but they were so far from us that one could scarcely see them. She said : *No revenge? Thinkest thou so, boy?* And then she said as one who believes absolutely, as one who has seen all the folk at their living and dying, not for one year but for many, not in one place but in all places, as one who knows it all over the whole wide earth:

Think again....

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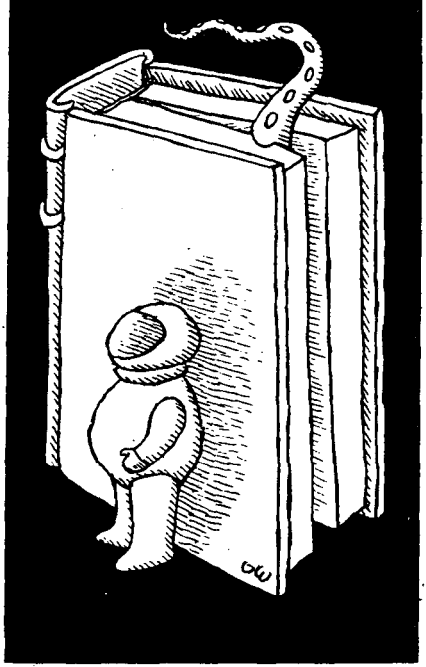
Books

MICHAEL BISHOP



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

Woman Space: Future and Fantasy, (Stories and Art by Women), New Victoria Publishers, Inc., (7 Bank Street, Lebanon, NH 03766), $3.95.

A Treasury of Modern Fantasy, edited by Terry Carr and Martin Harry Greenberg, Avon, $8.95 (trade paperback).

The Berkley Showcase, Volume 4, edited by Victoria Schochet and John Silbersack, Berkley Books, $2.25.

Twelve Fair Kingdoms, by Suzette Haden Elgin, Doubleday, $9.95.

The Affirmation, by Christopher Priest, Charles Scribner's Sons, $10.95.

ABCDEFG HIJKLM NPOQRST UVWXYZ: Poems, by Thomas M. Disch, Anvil Press (69 King George Street, London SE10 8PX, England), £3.25, $6.95 (U.S.A., Small Press Dist., 1784 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, CA 94709).

In *Woman Space*, a 92-page anthology of feminist fiction and artwork, an introduction attributed to the New Victoria Collective declares that "traditionally (science fiction) has relegated women to passive roles: the prize to be won, the wife left behind, the object to be saved," etc. Subsequently, the editors also note that speculative fiction represents "a particularly useful vehicle for testing women's theories and ideas."

I have no quarrel with either of these statements. Does anyone else? Thirteen years after the first appearances of Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Joanna Russ's *Picnic on Paradise*, they have the ring of well-wrought but rusty bells. Had

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this little book sprung into the world a decade ago, it *might* have had the impact of a battle cry or maybe an attention-riveting *cri de coeur*. Today it emerges mewling, as if after a tedious peristaltic struggle through the womb of a time warp — which, considering that a government grant funded the project, may be an appropriate analogy.

Women's issues remain urgent, of course, but over the past fifteen or twenty years our field has profited so enormously from an infusion of talented female writers that I hope I may be pardoned for failing to do cartwheels over *Women Space*. Twelve stories and a poem — along with some interesting black-and-white graphics, the sharpest and best a startling composition by Marcia Huyette — fill these generous, close-set pages. Unfortunately, most of the prose strikes me as opaque, precious, hackneyed, or unpromisingly minor. Hyperspace, pollution, computers, colony planets, clones, and (heaven forfend) even a monstrous urban dome figure prominently in these imaginings, but usually in dog-eared or murkily metaphorical ways.

Only one story seized and unremittingly held my interest, "Zero Sum Game" by Claudia Lamperti and Jennifer Malik, each of whom is also represented by a solo effort. Positing an unusual form of future competition, this piece generates some real suspense and concludes with a bitter indeterminacy. It would not be out of place in a volume of Terry Carr's *Universe* or Marta Randall's *New Dimensions*. By the same token, I can imagine only three other stories in *Woman Space* — Lamperti's "Without a Daughter," Carole Rosenthal's "A Miracle, and Other Solutions," and Eileen Kernaghan's "The Devil We Know" — escaping the slush pile of any of this field's major professional publications.

Let me add here that *Woman Space* also ... "Includes Stories by Joanna Russ and Josephine Saxon," a fact hopefully broached on the cover. The Saxon, however, sticks in the memory only if you replace its Scotch Tape every two or three days, and the Russ reads like a creative-writing assignment turned in by a precociously mordant fifteen-year-old. It should. The introduction informs us that she wrote it when she was fifteen. I must suppose that she magnanimously entrusted it to the New Victoria Collective only because she cannot refuse the Cause. Whether *you* refuse or affirm the Cause is your own business. For your $3.95 you get neither an historic manifesto nor a provocative mix of good writing, but a well-intentioned curiosity. Maybe that's enough, but I'm glad I didn't pay for my copy.

An investment of nine bucks amply rewards the buyer of Terry Carr and Martin Harry Greenberg's *A Treasury of Modern Fantasy*, and I would offer the same testimonial even if "Within the Walls of Tyre" by Michael Bishop

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did not happen to be its final entry. Many of the editors' selections justify the compilation and price of this volume, but my current favorite, one of only four stories by women, is a taut and atmospheric vampire tale written by Joanna Russ about ten years after the apprentice piece featured in *Woman Space*.

"My Dear Emily" originally appeared in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (July, 1962). Reading it for the first time in this comprehensive Avon anthology (although I *do* wonder about the dearth of selections by women), I was stunned by its seemingly off-hand brilliance. Set in San Francisco in the 1880s, "My Dear Emily" relies on unobtrusive present-tense narration, telling snippets of dialogue, and a fast-paced filmic structure to unravel a drama as eerily horrifying and inevitable as *Medea*. It also incorporates some political and/or sexual concerns — covert as well as blatant male tyranny, erotic ambivalence, female systems of mutual support — that have preoccupied Russ throughout her subsequent career. Although the editors wrongly claim that a Nebula Award she won in 1973 came to her in 1967, I am fairly sure that this slip is atypical of their research methods and proofreading skills.

The contents of *A Treasury of Modern Fantasy* — thirty-three short stories, novelettes, or novellas — suggests editorial care rather than clumsiness. In their prefatory remarks Carr and Greenberg tell us, "Every story in this book originally appeared in a fantasy magazine, and the overall mixture of styles and subjects shows the rich variety of imagination that these magazines have presented." Selections from *F&SF*, the most consistently literate of all the fantasy publications, dominate the contents, accounting for thirteen of the eighteen stories chosen from the years 1951 to 1978. *Weird Tales*, with six stories from the period 1924 to 1949, constitutes the next most reliable source of material, with the relatively short-lived *Unknown* in third place with three selections from a four-year period.

Stylistically, these tales run the gamut from Lovecraftian ultraviolet ("The Rats in the Wall") to Ellisonian anguish ("Jeffty Is Five"). I especially relish the prose, alternately evocative and self-parodying, of Clark Ashton Smith's "The Coming of the White Worm," from the April, 1941, issue of *Stirring Science Stories:* "Instructed by his fellow-wizards, he performed the rites that are scarce suitable for narration, and swore the vow of unspeakable alienage." No doubt. Bookended by C. M. Kornbluth's "Thirteen O'Clock" and Theodore Sturgeon's "Yesterday Was Monday," Smith's tale evokes not only the otherworldly era of Evagh the warlock, but also the eldritch catholicity of the pulps in the early 1940s. What a brave and heartening trio.

In spite of the shocks and horrors,

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what an upbeat and entertaining anthology. Any collection that contrives to get Robert A. Heinlein ("Our Fair City") and Thomas M. Disch ("Descending") between the same set of covers deserves the Nobel Peace Prize as well as a World Fantasy Award. The other three stories by women? "Daemon" by C.L. Moore, "One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts" by Shirley Jackson, and "Through a Glass — Darkly" by Zenna Henderson. Moore's story bored and disappointed me, being too long for its substance, but the Henderson diverts and the Jackson attained classic status the moment it came out of her typewriter. If you have not already read it, where have you been?

"Seduction," one of six contributions by women to the latest *Berkley Showcase* volume, bears a superficial resemblance to Russ's "My Dear Emily," primarily because both stories introduce vampires as objects of fatal attraction. But where Russ employs a kind of hair-trigger emotional shorthand to vivify this theme, Doris Vallejo, a new writer with two novels already to her credit, lets go with several bursts of melodramatic birdshot: "Our nights were not always spent in the tempestuous bloody-lathered embraces that I described earlier. The effect of theses episodes, no matter how momentarily exhilarating, was always to leave me listless and depressed." Finishing this florid wish-fulfillment fantasy, I felt much the same way.

The stories by the other female contributors to *Showcase* exhibit more control. "Distress Call" by Connie Willis details the submergence of a young woman's personality by recurring metaphorical reference to — I kid you not — the sinking of the *Titanic.* (Last year Willis won praise for a debut story in which her structuring metaphor is a deadly solar flare-up. With the disaster at the Hyatt tea dance in Kansas City and the eruptions of Mount St. Helens fresh in public memory, she should not run short of inspiration. I like this writer's resourcefulness and style, but I fear a grisly trend.) Pat Cadigan, in "The Pathosfinder," introduces a new variety of psychological therapy in a hard-boiled narrative that ultimately discloses a moving human truth. And Phyllis Gotlieb's "Blue Apes," is an old-fashioned science fiction tale that put me momentarily in mind of Avram Davidson's neglected gem, "The House the Blakeneys Built" (*F&SF*; January, 1965). Here Gotlieb gives us a colony planet, the devolution of some of its inhabitants, and a disturbed young agent who must plumb this mystery to complete his assignment. To these familiar ingredients the author bring a quiet passion and an expertly inconspicuous array of storytelling skills.

In addition to an interview with Elizabeth A. Lynn conducted by Vonda N. McIntyre (wherein Lynn divulges the sf novels that she taught

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one year in a Women Studies program at San Franciso State), *Showcase* also contains a pair of sardonic poems by Marge Piercy, both of which are clever and one of which misspells "superseded." Tsk, tsk.

Which brings me, by the pot-hole-riven yellow-brick road of gender-dictated artifice, to the stories by (ahem) men. Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.'s, "Younggold," an excerpt from his Berkley novel *Caverns*, effectively warns me away from the series which the novel initiates. Thanks. Next to "Air Kwatz" by Ronald Anthony Cross, however, "Younggold" positively sparkles. The editors tell us that Cross has been working on these, uh, "Kwatz" stories off and on for two years. I hope he gets help soon. Meanwhile, he can file a malpractice suit against Doctors Schochet and Silbersack for failing to discourage this self-destructive behavior.

I like the remaining four stories. Jack Dann serves up a piquant soufflé in "Fairy Tale," with a "Yinglish-Yiddish Glossary" for dessert. Alan Ryan, a new writer with a low-key style and a penchant for turning old story concepts on their heads or sides, checks in with "Margaret Dead, Margaret Alive," a story notable not only for its risky use of the future tense but also for its affecting sense of the human dilemma. (Ryan, I think, has missed a bet at story's end by failing to repeat his opening sentence in either the past or present tense, but this is clearly a debatable technical consideration.) In "Alternate 51: Bliss" Robert Thurston creates a moody alternate-worlds parable that ingeniously beggars summary. And R.A. Lafferty's "In Deepest Glass" casts religious conviction in the form of a wry allegory with no protagonist but the author's apocryphal history of stained glass windows and a baroque, bitter whimsy. This story ranks with the quirky masterpieces Lafferty was turning out in the heyday of Damon Knight's *Orbit* series. No one does them better. No one else knows how.

Suzette Haden Elgin, the creator of the intrepid Tri-Galactic agent Coyote Jones, returns with *Twelve Fair Kingdoms*, Book One of the Ozark Fantasy Trilogy. She brings with her as narrator a fourteen-year-old troubleshooter for planet Ozark's Confederation of Continents by the name of Responsible of Brightwater. Elgin first attracted notice with compelling feminist (although Elgin herself might wonder at the restrictive nuances of this label) novelette, "For the Sake of Grace" (*F&SF*; May, 1969). Resourceful and feisty, if occasionally prone to impetuous error, Responsible of Brightwater impresses me as a liberated descendant of that early story's heroine, Jacinth. But on Ozark, as opposed to Jacinth's planet Abba, no male hierarchy sells women short, spurns their talents, or orders their lives.

How to describe this book? By

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harkening back to the worn convention of planetary colonization by discreet social or ethnic groups, it sometimes appears to be asking to be read as a science fiction novel. By stirring in a Quest (Elgin's capitalization), indigenous flying Mules (likewise), a clutch of charming Grannies (ditto), and various magical Tranformations ("), however, the book blithely repudiates the sf trademark in favor of a fantasy tag. What results is a hybrid, the literary equivalent of a Mule — but with an infinitely more dulcet voice. Still, I have to wonder why Elgin did not simply translate her Twelve Fair Kingdoms to an alternate continuum where her complicated hillbilly milieu has conveniently prevailed since time immemorial. I cannot believe that in A.D. 2012 any such specialized diaspora as she postulates in her novel's Appendix could *ever* take place, much less only three decades from now.

This objection goes by the board once you get into the book. Responsible sets off on Mule-back to roust out the traitor who seeks to sabotage the Grand Jubilee at which the Twelve Families will reaffirm their faith in the Confederation, and, as she goes from Castle to Castle on her Quest, one silly-clever adventure succeeds another. Elgin's fluid, folksy prose, unflagging good humor, and occasional bittersweet insights into human nature leaven these lumpy ingredients, meanwhile laying the foundation for the trilogy's second volume. I look forward to it with restrained expectation.

Christopher Priest's most recent novel I awaited with chafing impatience. *The Affirmation*, which bids fair to garner a wide readership outside the established sf audience, demonstrates an attention to style, a self-conscious concern for structure, a thematic seriousness, and degree of literary ambition seldom associated with your moon-garden variety of "worldcrafters." Indeed, to link this review with my unifying concern for women's contributions to the sf field, I can plausibly — if somewhat misleadingly — describe this novel as a chilly conflation of Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea books and Kate Wilhelm's *Margaret and I*. A vivid study of madness, it gracefully yo-yos the reader back and forth between England in the late 1970s and the imaginary reaches of the Dream Archipelago in an era distortedly mirroring our own.

Tying these two backdrops together is Peter Sinclair, a 29-year-old Londoner who has turned to autobiography in hopes of achieving a "higher truth" than that embodied by mere memory. In his manuscript, however, he substitutes the city Jethra for London, the country Faiandland for England, and an infinitude of islands for the continents and polities actually extant in our southern hemisphere. (He disdains providing a map.) His search for mental health and a kind of metaphysical immortality through this

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compulsive labor finds a parallel in his autobiographical counterpart's submission to a treatment, athanasia, guaranteed to prolong his life well beyond normal human limits.

Although I admire — intellectually — what Priest has done here, I feel very little affection for it. The prose has an elegant precision, but, by design, this precision is that of the scalpel, cold and cutting. And although Priest rotates his characters through three dimensions, slowly and conscientiously, he does so as if on a solipsistic rotisserie behind a spotless pane of Pyrex. I understand that what this novel ultimately affirms is the affirmation implicit in the creative process — but the humorlessness of the narrative, the characters' tiresome proclivity for recrimination and despair, and the studied interruption of Sinclair's final sentence bespeak an auctorial intelligence unwilling to let these pitiful people off their leash. Priest very nearly permits technical expertise to take precedence over human feeling.

I have not mentioned the women who impinge on Sinclair's life — his sister Felicity, his lover Gracia, and Gracia's Dream Archipelago counterpart, Seri — because, finally, they all illuminate or refract the narrator's madness. They have little or no identity apart from it. By design of course; altogether by design.

It has finally happened. I appear to be aligning myself foursquare against the promulgation of pessimism by literary means. Perhaps I am, but I reserve the right to pass judgment case by case. In this case, I would call *The Affirmation* the-most-admirable-novel-I-didn't-really-enjoy that I've read this year. A more exasperating evaluation I can scarcely imagine, and I am sorry. Truly.

I was preparing to type a final copy of the five previous reviews when a robed and bearded figure manifested himself beside my two-speed floor fan in, well, a "burst of glory."

"Wait a minute, Michael," the apparition said. "You've got to review this one, too." He extracted a pale yellow paperback from a pocket on his robe and laid it reverently on my rolltop, right beside my typewriter. I stared at the book in angry incredulity.

"How am I supposed to review the alphabet?" I demanded, exploiting my outrage to keep my fear in check.

"Not the alphabet, Michael, but a book of poems arranged alphabetically by title under the crafty overall title *ABCDEFG HIJK—*"

"I *know* my alphabet," I interrupted the intruder. "What has this book got to do with either women's issues or science fiction? And why are you in such an all-fired hurry to have me mention it?"

"Well, it's by Thomas M. Disch. Several months ago I took five books to his New York apartment so that he could review them for *F&SF*, and he slipped this one onto my person before

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I had quite managed my final fade-out. A sly and self-serving maneuver, I might add. You've already mentioned Marge Piercy's poems, albeit in a semi-smart-alecky fashion, and I thought you might say something about these so that if Disch ever discovers my true identity, he won't reduce me to caricature in some future column. Besides, several of his poems are decidedly science-fictiony."

Scarcely pausing for breath (perhaps he needed none), the intruder read aloud the poems "Alternate Universe I," "Alternate Universe II," Alternate Universe III," and "On the Disposal of My Body."

"Well, that last one's hardly an sf poem," he confessed, "but it tickles me every time I recite it. Lots of the others are just as pithy, bright, and irreverent. Seriousness he doesn't completely eschew, you know, but he really gets off on irreverence."

I pointed a finger at the stranger. "Why, you're—"

"No," he said.

"But you represented yourself to Disch as Jesus."

"He was hungry for a theophany, and I hadn't had a good bull session on a religious topic since my freshman year at Oberon College. I took advantage of the poor man, but—" returning the volume of poems to my desk — "he took advantage of me, too."

"Then who *are* you, really?"

"The Book Fairy," replied the apparition, fading from view. "What with postal strikes and air-controller mutinies, you just can't trust the mails these days...."

Departing, the Book Fairy tangled his robe in the blades of my two-speed fan. He eventually made good his getaway, but the acrid tang of burnt wiring filled my study. I put together some letters of the alphabet in a colorful way and decided not to review Disch's poems. My column was much too long already.

Note: In my last Books column (June, 1980) I disparagingly lumped Karl Edward Wagner's continuing character Kane with two uninspired barbarian heroes from whom Kane differs in a number of particulars. I did so on no other basis but an uninformed assumption, and although I am still not an aficianado of this kind of story, I did. Wagner, a writer of some skill and considerable integrity, an injustice. I apologize.

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This has turned out to be an issue of truly stunning innovation, in that it includes not only an SF-Gothic (p. 148), but, here, what is undoubtedly the first and only example of preppy science fiction — which may seem like a contradiction in terms. But Yale grad and SF writer George Alec Effinger knows his stuff and makes it seem as natural as loafers without socks....

Maureen Birnbaum, Barbarian Swordsperson

(as told to Bitsy Spiegelman)

BY

GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

The last time I saw Muffy Birnbaum was, let me see, last December — no, make that last January, because it was right after exams and before Mums and I spent a couple of dreadful weeks at the B and T in Palm Beach. So that makes it ten months almost, and she told me to wait a year before I revealed this to the world, *to use her exact words. But I don't think Muffy will mind that I'm two months early. She's long ago and far away, if you believe her story. Do I believe her story? Look. She was missing for a full week, and then I get this telegram — a* telegram, *can you believe it?* Not *a phone call.* Meet me under the Clock, 15 January, noonish. Come alone. Trust me. Kisses, Muffy. *What was I supposed to think? I show up and she's not there, but there's a note waiting for me:* Come to Room 1623. *Just too mysterious, but up I go. The door's open and I walk in, and there's goddamn Maureen Danielle Birnbaum practically* naked, *wearing nothing but these leather straps across her shoulders and a little gold G-string, and she's got this goddamn* sword *in one hand like she was expecting the Sheriff of Nottingham or something to come through the door instead of her best friend and roommate. I couldn't think of anything to say at first, so she called down for some ice, pointed to a chair, and began to tell me this story. I'll give it to you just the way it is on my tape; then you tell* me *if you believe it.*

So listen, I'm telling you this story. Believe me, I'd *had* it, absolutely *had it.* School was a *complete* bore and I was absolutely falling to pieces. Absolutely. I needed a vacation and I told Daddy that a little intense skiing action would shape me up very nicely, and

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so, just like that, I found myself at Mad River Glen, looking very neat, I thought, until I saw some of the competition, the collegiate talent. They were deadly cute and they knew it, and all you had to do was ask them and they'd tell you all about it. You could just about tell where they went to school, like they were wearing uniforms. The Vassar girls were the ones sort of flouncing downhill wearing their circle pins on the front of their hundred-dollar goose-down ski parkas. The Bennington girls were the ones looking rugged and trying to ski back *uphill*. Definitely Not Our Kind, sweetie.

Are those your cigarettes, Bitsy? Mind if I — no, just toss me the whole pack. I have matches here in the ashtray. My *God*. I haven't had a cigarette in *so long*—

Where was I? Vermont, right. So I was staring down this goddamn hill, if you can believe it, and I'm all set to push off and go barreling down the mountain at some outrageous speed, when I stop. I look up at the sky — it's starting to get dark, you know, and absolutely clear and kind of sweet, but *cold* — when I feel this weird feeling inside. First I thought I was going to die, just absolutely *die*. Then I thought, "My God, I know what it is. And they always say nothing can happen if—" You know. But I was wrong both times. The next thing I knew I was standing stark naked in the snow beside my body, which was still dressed up in this cute outfit from L.L. Bean, and I thought, "Muffy, you've *had* it." I thought I was dead or something, but I didn't understand why I was so goddamn *cold*. Then I looked up into the sky and this bright red dot caught my eye and I sort of shivered. I knew right then, I said to myself, "That is where I'm going." Heaven or Hell, here I come. And just like that I felt this whushing and dizziness and everything, and I opened my eyes, and I wasn't in Vermont anymore but I was still cold.

I'm drinking Bloody Marys. It isn't too early for you, is it? Then you try calling down for ice, I've given up on them. Are you hungry? We'll have lunch later. I'm putting myself on a diet, but I'll go with you and you can have something.

Anyway, they didn't prepare me at the Greenberg School for what was waiting for me when I opened my eyes. Here I was on some weirdo planet out in space, for God's sake. Say, Bitsy, you have any gum or what? Chiclets? Yuck. Let me have — no, just one. thanks. A weirdo planet, if you can believe that. I was standing there at the top of the run one second, having this *unbelievable* fight with the zipper on the ski jacket Pammy — that's Daddy's new wife — bought me for Christmas — and the next minute I'm up to my ankles in orange grunge. And I was so cold I thought I would freeze to death. I was cold because — we're just going to have to live without the ice, I think,

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Bitsy, because this hotel probably has a goddamn *policy* against it or something, so just pour it in the glass — I was standing there in the proverbial buff! Me! Three years living with me at the Greenberg School, and even *you* never saw my pink little derrière. And here I am starko for the whole world to see. What world it was I didn't know, so I didn't know *who* could see, but believe me, Bitsy, I didn't particularly care. Right then I had two or three pressing problems on my mind, and getting dressed was high on the list. I really missed that ski outfit. It was cold as hell.

All around me there was nothing but this gross orange stuff on the ground. I don't know what it was. It wasn't grass, I know that. It felt more like the kind of sponge the cleaning woman keeps under your sink for a couple of years. Gross. And there was nothing else to see except some low hills off in one direction. I decided to head that way. There sure wasn't anything any other way, and — who knew? — there may have been a Bloomingdale's on the other side of the hills. At that point I would have settled for Lamston's, *believe* me.

You're going to die laughing when I tell you this, absolutely die. When I took a step I went sailing up into the air. Just like a balloon, and I thought, "Muffy, honey, *what* did they put in your *beer?*" When I settled back down I tried it again, and I flew away again. It took me absolutely an hour to figure out how to walk and run and all that. I still don't know why it was. One of those lame boys from Brush-Bennett would know, right off the bat, but it wasn't all that important to me. I just needed to learn to handle it. So in a while, still freezing my completely cute buns off, I got to the top of the first hill and I looked down on my new world.

You want to know what I saw? Was that the door? *You* better get it, Bitsy, because even though Daddy stays here *all* the time the staff has been just *too* dreary for words. You should have heard what they said about my sword. They talked about my sword a lot, because they were too embarrassed to mention my costume. I think it's — who? The ice? Would you be a dear and leave the boy something? I don't have a goddamn *penny*. I mean, you don't see any pockets, do you?

There was more orange crud all the way to the whatyoucall — the horizon. But there was a little crowd of people down there about a quarter of a mile away. It looked to me like a little tailgate party, like we used to have with your parents in New Haven before the Harvard game. I thought, "That's nice, they'll be able to drive me to a decent motel or something until I can get settled." But then I wondered how I was going to walk up to them all naked and glowing with health and frostbite and all. I thought about covering up the more strategic areas with the orange stuff from the ground, but I didn't even know if I could rip it

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loose. I was standing there thinking when I heard this girl scream. She sounded like Corkie the time we threw that dead fish into the shower with her. There was something *awful* going on down there, a mugging or a purse-snatching or something terrible, so what does yours truly do? I started running downhill toward them. Don't look so *surprised*. It's just something you do when you find yourself on a creepy planet, undressed and stone cold, with nothing else around except the two moons in the sky. Did I mention that there were two moons? Well, there were. I ran toward the people because I needed a lift into town, wherever it was, and if I helped the poor girl out maybe her daddy would let me stay at their place for a while.

When I got closer I saw that I had made just a little bitty mistake. The station wagon and the Yalies turned into a drastic and severe kind of fight, a brawl, really, except everybody was using one of these swords and they were using them for *real*. I mean, Bitsy, my *God*, blood was pouring all over *everywhere* and people were actually *dying* and it was all kind of heroic and all that and *very* horrible and dramatic. It was people against big, giant things with four arms. No, really. *Really*. Bitsy, stop *laughing*. There were these huge old creatures with four arms, and they were chopping away at the normal-sized people, everybody fighting away with these *intense* grins on their faces. I never did find out about that, why they were all *smiling* while they were whacking away at each other. Anyway, while I stood there the two groups just about wiped each other out, all the giant creatures except one and all the people except this one positively *devastating* guy. All the other guys and girls were lying very dead on the orange stuff, and it wasn't really *surprising*. I mean, just imagine something that's twelve feet tall and has arms slashing swords around up where you can barely *see*, for God's sake. And then this *darling* boy goes and tangles his adorable legs and falls over backwards.

"Bitsy, are you listening to this, or what? I mean, I don't know why I even bothered — no, look. I didn't *have* to send you the telegram. I could have called Mother. Except she would have had *kittens* if she had seen me like this. Do you understand? This was a very moving moment for me, Bitsy, I mean, watching these kids fighting like that and all, and even though I didn't know them, I got very emotional and everything. So I'd appreciate it, I really would, if you'd show a little respect. *You've* never had to fight for *anything* except with the burger-brained Amherst freshman you went out with senior year. *Of course* I remember him. He reminds me a lot of these four-armed things.

Well, if anything *terminal* happened to my blond hero, that monster was coming after *me* next. So, perky little thing that I am, I run up and grab a

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sword — this sword, I call her "Old Betsy" because that's what Davy Crockett called his rifle or something — I grab Old Betsy and I stand there trying not to look that ... thing in the eye. This was very easy, believe me, because his eyes are *at least* six feet over my head. And I'm all nice and balanced — *you* remember, you were there, you remember how *tremendous* I was in that six weeks of fencing we had sophomore year, with what's-her-name, Miss Duplante. You remember how she was absolutely terrified of me? Anyway, picture me standing there *en garde* waiting for this four-armed darling to settle into position. But he *doesn't*, that's what's so scary, he just goes *whacko!* and takes a wide swipe at my goddamn head.

Only I'm not there anymore, I'm about fifty feet away. I remembered that I could jump, but *really*. So I hop around for a minute or two to get my bearings and to stay away from the thing's sword. I hop, and I jump, bounce, bounce, bounce, all around the landscape. And the creature is watching me, *mad as hell*. My blond dream is still on the ground, and *he's* watching too. "Get a *sword*, dummy," I yell at him, and he nods. That's something else I forgot to tell you, Bitsy. All the people on this planet speak English. It's really neat and very convenient. So between the two of us we finished the monster off. No, it's just *too awful* to think about, stabbing and bleeding and hacking and all like that. Fencing was a lot tidier — you know, just a kind of polite poking around with a sharp stick. And *I* had to do all the *heavyweight* hacking because my boyfriend couldn't reach anything terribly vital on the four-armed thing. He was taking mighty swings at the giant's knees, and meanwhile good old Muffy is cutting its pathetic little head off. Just altogether *unreal*.

Well, that's the dynamic, exciting carnage part. After I took care of the immediate danger, the boy starts to talk to me. "Hello," he goes. "You were excellent."

"Thanks," I go. At this point I feel like I'm riding on a horse with only one rocker, but I don't let it show. The old Greenberg School *pride*, Bitsy.

He goes, "My name is Prince Van."

"Uh-huh," I go. "I'm Maureen Birnbaum. My daddy is a contract lawyer and I live with my mother. We raise golden retrievers."

"How nice," the prince goes. Let me tell you what this guy *looked* like! You wouldn't *believe* it! Do you remember that boy who came down to visit that drecky redhead from Staten Island? No, not the boy from Rutgers, the one from — where was it? That place I never *heard* of — Colby College, in Maine? Sounds like a goddamn *cheese* factory or something? Anyway, standing beside me on the orange stuff is something just like him, only the prince is awesome. He is tall and strong and blond with perfect teeth and eyes like Paul Newman and he's

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wearing, well, you see what *I'm* wearing. Just *imagine*, honey, if that isn't just too devastating for you. He is *beautiful*. And his name is Prince Van. I always told you that someday my prince would—

Okay, okay. I didn't really know what to say to him or anything. I mean, we'd just had this sort of pitched battle and all, and there were all these unpleasant *bodies* lying around — we were stepping over people here and there, and I was trying not to notice. We stopped and he bent down and took this harness for me from someone he said had been his sister. He didn't seem sad or anything. He was very brave, *intensely* brave, no tears for Sis, the gang back at the palace wouldn't approve. And all the dead boys looked just like him, all blond and large and uncomfortably cute, and all the girls looked just like Tri-Delts, with feathered blonde hair and perfect teeth. They had been his retinue, Prince Van explained, and he said I shouldn't grieve. He could get another one.

"Where to?" I go. The palace couldn't be too far away, I thought.

"Well," he says — and his voice was like a handful of Valium; I just wanted to curl up and listen to it — he says, like, "my city is two thousand miles *that* way." he pointed, "but there is a closer city one thousand miles *that* way." He pointed behind us.

I go, "*Thousand?* You've *got* to be kidding."

He says, like, "I have never seen anyone like you." And he smiled. Bitsy, that was just the kind of thing my mother had *warned* me about, and I had begun to think it didn't really exist. I think I was in love.

"I'm from another world," I go. I tried to sound like I partied around in space quite a bit.

"That explains it," he goes. "It explains your strength and agility and your exotic beauty. I am captivated by your raven tresses. No one on our world has hair your color. It is very beautiful." *Raven tresses*, for God's sake! I think I blushed, and I think he wanted me to. We were holding hands by now. I was thinking about one or two thousand miles alone with Prince Van of Who-Knows-Where. I wondered what boys and girls did on this planet when they were alone. I decided that it was the same everywhere.

We walked for a long time and I asked a lot of questions. He must have thought I was just *really* lame, but he never laughed at me. I learned that the cities were so far because we were walking across the bottom of what had once been a great ocean, years and years before. There weren't oceans and lakes and things on this planet now. They have all their water delivered or something. I thought, "There's *oil* down there." I wanted to remember that for when we got to the palace. I don't think anyone had realized it yet.

"Then where do you go sailing?" I go.

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"Sailing?" he asked innocently.

"What about swimming?"

"Swimming?"

He was cute, absolutely *tremendous*, in fact, but life without sailing and swimming would be just too terribly *triste*, you know? And I think he was just being polite before when I mentioned golden retrievers.

I say, like, "Is there somewhere where I can pick up some clothes?" I figured that although his city was two thousand miles away, there were probably isolated little ocean-bottom suburbs along the way or shopping malls where all the blond people came to buy new straps and swords and stuff.

"Clothes?" he goes. I knew he was going to say that, I just *knew* it, but as gross as it was I had to hear it from his own lips.

I walked along for a while, dying, absolutely *dying* for a cigarette, not saying anything. Then I couldn't stand it any longer. "Van," I go, "listen. It isn't like it hasn't been wonderful with you, cutting up that big old monster and all. But, like, there are some things about this relationship that are totally the worst, but *really*."

"Relationship?" he goes. He kept smiling. I think I could eventually see enough of it.

I explained it all to him. There were no horses. There was no sailing, no swimming, no skiing, no raquetball. There were no penny loafers, no mixers at the boys' schools, no yearbooks. There was no Junior Year Abroad, no Franny and Zooey Glass, no Nantucket Island, *no Coors*. There was no Sunday *Times*, no Godiva chocolates, no Dustin Hoffman. There was no Joni Mitchell and no food processors and no golden retrievers and no little green Triumphs.

There were no clothes. Bitsy, *there was no shopping!*

So kind of sadly I kissed him on the cheek and told myself that his couldn't-be-cuter expression was a little sad, too. I say, like, "*Adieu, mon cher*," and I give him a little wave. Then I stretched myself out toward the sky again — oh, yes, just a little late I told myself that I wasn't absolutely sure about what I was doing, that I might end up God only knew where — and waited to whush back to the snowy mountaintop in Vermont. I missed. But fortunately it wasn't as bad as it could have been. I mean, I didn't land on *Saturn* or anything. I turned up at the corner of Eighth Avenue and 45th Street. No one noticed me very much; I fit right into that neighborhood.

So if I can just ask you a little favor, Bitsy, then I'll be on my way. Yes, on my way, goddamn it, I'm going back. I'm not going to leave that but *totally* attractive Prince Van to those perky blonde hometown honeys — he is *mine*. I kept my harness and Old Betsy on the way here, so I think I know how to get back there again with anything I want to take with me. So I want to pick up a few things first. My daddy always told me to Be Prepared.

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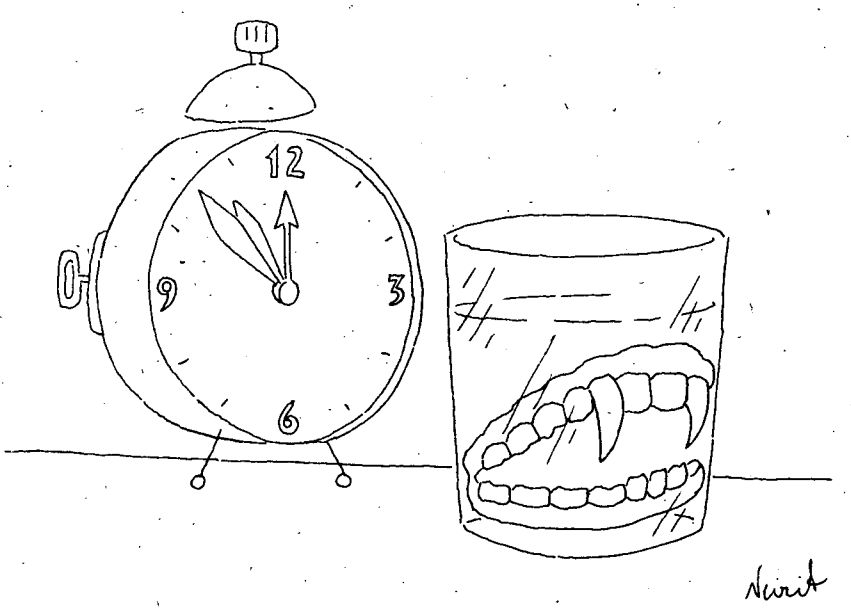
He said that all the time, he's a Mason or something. He sure was prepared when he met Pammy, and he's close to fifty years old.

Never mind. Anyway, let's go rummage in a bin somewhere and suit me up with a plaid skirt or two and some cute jeans and some sweaters and some alligator shirts and Top-Siders and a brand-new insulated ski jacket and sunglasses and some *Je Reviens* and stuff. It'll be fun!

Oh. And a circle pin. My old one wore out.

We went shopping at Saks and Bloomingdale's — I went to Korvettes and got her some cheaper clothes first, though. I didn't want to walk around midtown Manhattan with Muffy while she was wearing nothing but suspenders and no pants. We charged four hundred dollars to Mums' cards, and let me tell you I heard about that *a few weeks later. But I was sworn to secrecy. Now Muffy's gone again, back to her secret paradise in the sky, back to Prince Van of the terribly straight teeth. I hope she's happy. I hope she comes back some day to tell me her adventures. I hope she pays me back the four hundred dollars. Perhaps only time will tell....*



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Tom Monteleone tells us that he is currently living in Baltimore, writing full time, working part-time for a Cable TV company. Upcoming books include DARK STARS AND OTHER ILLUMINATIONS (short story collection), OZYMANDIAS, a novel (Doubleday) and THE DRAGONSTAR, a novel which is being serialized in Analog. *His first F&SF story concerns Russell and Mitzi Southers, whose attempt to help a starving child takes a strange and chilling turn.*

Spare the Child

BY

THOMAS F. MONTELEONE

The nightmare began quite simply.

In fact, Russell Southers had not the slightest inkling that he was entering into a nightmare at the time. He was passing his Sunday as he always did in the fall: seated before the Zenith Chromacolor III, watching the Giants invent new ways to lose a football game, while his wife Mitzi read the *New York Times*.

"Jesus Christ!" yelled Russell, as the Giants' fullback bucked the middle of the Packer's goal-line defense for the fourth time without scoring.

"Oh, Russell, look at this picture..." said Mitzi, showing him a page from *The Times Magazine*.

"First down on the *two!* On the *two*, and they can't score! I can't believe it...."

"Russell?"

"*What*, honey?" He looked at his wife as the thought of how she could dare interrupt him during a football game (especially after thirteen years of marriage) crossed his mind.

"Look at this picture," she said again.

A razor blade commercial blared from the Zenith, and he turned to regard his wife. She was holding up a full-page advertisement from the *Times Magazine*, which featured a sad-eyed child in rags, framed by a desolate village background. It was a typical plea from one of those foster-parent programs which sponsor foreign orphans in far-away countries stricken with war, famine, and disease. *SPARE THE CHILD* said the banner line atop the picture, while smaller print explained the terrible level of life, then informed the reader how much money to send, where, and how the money would help the poor, starving children.

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"Yeah, so what?" asked Russell as he glanced at the page.

"So *what?* Russell, look at the little boy. Look at those big, dark eyes! Oh, Russell, how can we sit here — in the lap of luxury — while those little babies are starving all over the world?"

"Lap of luxury?" The commercial had ended and the Packers were driving upfield from their two-yard line with short passes and power sweeps.

"Well, you know what I mean, Russell ... it says here that we can be foster parents for a child for as little as fifteen dollars a month, and that we'll get a picture of our child and letters each month, and we can write to him too."

"Uh-huh...." The Giants' middle linebacker had just slipped, allowing the Packers' tight end to snare a look-in pass over the middle. "Jesus!"

"So I was thinking that we should do something to help. I mean, we pay more than fifteen dollars a month for cable TV, right?"

"What? Oh, yes, Mitzi...." The Packers' quarterback had just been thrown for a loss, momentarily halting their surge upfield.

"Well, can we do it?"

Another commercial, this time about the new Chrysler, hit the screen, and Russell looked at his wife absently. "Do what?"

"Why, become foster parents! Russell *look* at this picture!"

"I looked at the picture, Mitzi! What do you want me to do with it ... frame it and put it over the mantel, for Christ's sake!"

Unruffled, Mitzi remained calm. "I said I want to join the 'Spare the Child' program, Russell. Can we do it?"

"What? You want to send *money* overseas? How do we know the kids are even getting it? Look at that ad — do you know what it costs to run a full-page ad in the *Times!* They don't seem like they need our measly fifteen bucks...."

"Russell, please...." She smiled and tilted her head the way she always did when she wanted something. The game was back on, and he was tired of being interrupted. *What the hell? What was another fifteen bucks?*

"All right, Mitzi ... we can do it." He exhaled slowly and returned to his game. The Giants lost anyway.

About twelve weeks after Russell and MItzi filled out the Spare the Child application and had sent in their first monthly check (and their second and third), they received a letter and picture from their foster child. The air mail envelope carried the return address of Kona-Pei — a small atoll in the Trobriand Islands group. Russell would not have known this piece of arcane geographical knowledge had not he received an official welcoming/confirming letter from the World Headquarters of Spare the Child several weeks previously. The letter also provided additional data.

His foster child's name was Tnen-

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Ku. She was a twelve-year-old girl, whose parents had been killed in a fishing-canoe accident, and who now lived at the island's missionary post, under the guardianship of her kinship-uncle, Goka-Pon, the village shaman.

Tnen-Ku's picture was a small, cracked, 3-x-5 black-and-white Polaroid snap, featuring a gangly prepubescent girl. She had long, straight, dark hair; large, darker almond-eyes; cheekbones like cut-crystal; and a pouting mouth that gave the hint of a wry smile at the corners. She wore a waist-to-knee wrap-around skirt and nothing else. Her just-developing breasts were tiny, sun-tanned cones, and she looked oddly, and somewhat chillingly, seductive to Russell when he first looked at her photograph.

Somewhat fascinated, Russell scanned her first correspondence:

Dear Second-Papa Russell:

This is to say many-thanks for becoming my Second-Papa. The U.S.A. money you send will let me not live at Mission all the time. You make my life happy.

Tnen-Ku

Mitzi was not altogether pleased with the first correspondence because Russell was named and *she* was not. And it was Mitzi's idea in the first place!

Russell Southers tried to placate his wife by saying that it was probably island custom to address only the male members of families, and that Mitzi could not expect the Trobriand Islanders to be as liberated as all the folks in northern suburban New Jersey. The tactic seemed to please Russell's wife, and soon her little foster child, Tnen-Ku, was the prime subject of conversation and pride at Mitzi's bridge games and garden parties. In fact, she began carrying the picture of the young girl about in her purse, so that everyone would be able to see what her new child looked like.

Even though Russell found Mitzi's behavior effusive and a bit embarrassing, he said nothing. After thirteen years of marriage, if he had discovered anything, it was that as long as the indulgence was not harmful or detrimental, it was usually better to give in to make Mitzi happy. And it seemed as though it was the little things in life that gave his wife the most joy. So fine, thought Russell, what's fifteen bucks, if it makes my wife happy?

And so each month, he wrote a check to the Spare the Child Foundation, and about once every third month, he and Mitzi would receive a short, impersonal note from the young island girl with the hauntingly deep, impossibly dark eyes.

Dear Second-Papa Russell,

This is to say many-thanks for more U.S.A. dollars. Maybe now I never go back to Mission. My life is happy.

Tnen-Ku

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Perhaps the most exasperating part of the young girl's letters was the unvarying sameness of them, and although this did not bother Russell, it began to prey upon Mitzi.

"You know, Russell, I'm getting sick of this little game," said Mitzi, out of the blue, while she and Russell were sitting in bed reading together.

"What little game, honey?" asked Russell absently. He was right in the middle of *The Manheist Malefaction*, the latest Nazi spy-thriller on *The Times* bestseller list, and was not surprised to be interrupted by Mitzi's *non sequitur*, since it had been one of her most enduring attributes.

"That foster-child thing..." she said in some exasperation, as though Russell should have *known* what had been preying on her mind.

"You mean Tnen-Ku? Why? What's the matter?" Russell laid down the book (he was at a familiar part of the plot — where the confused, but competent, protagonist has just met the standard young and beautiful companion), and looked at his wife.

"Well," said Mitzi. "I mean, it's nice being a foster parent and all that, and I guess I should feel good about helping out a poor child, but...."

"But what?" asked Russell. "Is it getting to be old hat?"

"Well, something like that. I mean, those letters she writes, Russell. If you can even *call* them letters.... They're so *boring*, and she never says anything interesting, or *nice* to us ... I feel like we're just being *used*."

"Well, we *are* being used a little, but that's what it's all about, Mitzi."

"Maybe so, but I thought it would be more exciting, more gratifying to be a foster parent for a little foreign child...." Mitzi looked to the ceiling and sighed.

"But we're supposed to be doing it so that Tnen-Ku feels happier, not necessarily for our own betterment or happiness. Isn't *that* what's important?"

"Oh, I don't know, Russell. You've seen that picture they sent us ... that little girl doesn't look like she's so bad off." Mitzi harrumphed lightly. "She looks like a little *tart*, if you ask me!"

Russell chuckled. "Well, you certainly have changed your tune lately!"

"No, I haven't! It's just that being a foster parent isn't what I thought it would be...."

"Are you sure that you're not just getting tired of it, that the novelty is wearing off? Remember how you were at first about backgammon? The aerobic dancing? And when's the last time you went out jogging?"

"Russell, this is different...."

"Okay, honey. We can drop out of the program anytime you want. We didn't sign any contract, you know."

Mitzi sighed and looked up at the ceiling as though considering the suggestion. "Well, if you really don't think she needs our help...."

"Wait a minute, this is *your* idea, remember!" Russell smiled, as it was

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always Mitzi's way — to twist things around so that it always seemed like Russell was the one who would bear responsibility for all decisions.

"Well, I know, but I wouldn't want to do anything behind your back. Besides, I was thinking that we could use some new drapes in the living room. The sun is starting to fade those gold ones, and we could use that fifteen dollars each month to pay for them...."

And so, having planted the seed, not another month went by before Mitzi announced to Russell that it was okay to drop out of the Spare the Child program, having already picked up a sample fabric book, trying to decide which new color would look best in her chrome-and-glass living room. Russell wrote a letter to the Spare the Child offices in New York City, politely explaining that financial pressure had forced them to withdraw from the program. He expressed the hope and good wishes that Tnen-Ku would continue to receive assistance from a new foster parent, and thanked them for the opportunity to be of some help, at least for a brief time.

Before the new drapes were delivered, he received a letter from the Trobriand Islands:

Dear Second-Papa Russell,

The mission-peoples say that you will send no more U.S.A. dollars for me. I am very sad by this. That means I must live at Mission again, and I do not like that. Goka-Pon say a father cannot give up his child. Do you know it is forbidden? Please do not stop U.S.A. dollars. For you and me.

Tnen-Ku

"Now isn't that strange," said Russell, reading the young girl's letter over a Saturday breakfast. "Forbidden, she says ... I wonder what that means? And what about this 'for you and me'?"

"Don't pay any attention to it dear. She's probably trying to make you feel guilty. You know what they say about people who get used to charity — they lose all incentive to do things for themselves, and all they learn is how to become professional beggars. By us stopping that money, we're probably doing the best thing in the world for her. Maybe she'll grow up now, and *be* somebody." Mitzi poked at the bacon which sizzled in the pan, turned over the more crispy pieces.

Russell tossed away the letter and did not think about it for several weeks, until he received a plea from the Spare the Child Program to reconsider canceling his donation. It was similar to the form letters one gets from magazines when you have obviously intended to not renew a subscription. He was going to throw it out but decided that a final, short note to the offices would stop any further correspondence. He wrote telling them

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that he did not intend to contribute to the foster-parent plan ever again and wished that they would stop badgering him. That ended it, or so he thought.

Two months later, he received a hand-written note from the Trobriand Islands group:

Dear Second-Papa Russell,

Mission-peoples say no more U.S.A. dollars from you. This very bad. Goka-Pon say you must be punished.

Tnen-Ku

Understandably, Russell was outraged and fired off another letter to the Spare The Child Program, enclosing a zerox of what he termed an "ungrateful, arrogant, and threatening" letter. He informed the agency that if he received any more correspondence from Tnen-Ku, he would initiate legal actions against the agency.

A secretary from the Spare The Child offices wrote a perfunctory apology which promised that Russell Southers would not be troubled again, and this seemed to appease both him and Mitzi, until three weeks later, when the cat died.

Actually, their cat, Mugsy, did not *die*; it had been killed — strangled and then nailed to Russell's garage door above a jerkily scrawled inscription which could have been in blood: *Tnen-Ku*. It was as though the young girl had sent them more correspondence, although of a different nature.

At first, Mitzi was horrified and Russell infuriated. They called the police, who did not seem terribly interested; the Spare the Child agency, which denied any culpability; and Russell's lawyer, who said that perhaps a flimsy case could be made against the agency but suggested that one of Russell's friends was most likely playing a very bad joke on him.

Russell was shocked to see the high levels of indifference and lack of true concern for what was happening to him but felt helpless to do much more than complain himself. He thought of writing a long threatening letter to Tnen-Ku, but something held him back. After all, it *was* impossible that the child had anything to do with Mugsy's demise — the island of Kona-Pei was thousands of miles from New Jersey. But what the hell *was* going on?

Second-Papa? Second-Papa...?

Russell was awakened from a deep sleep by the voice. In the first moments of wakefulness, he found himself thinking that her voice sounded very much like he would have imagined it to sound.

Whose voice!? Bolting straight up, Russell stared down to the foot of the bed and felt his breath rush out of him. His flesh drew up and pimpled and he felt immediately chilled. There was a figure, a young girl, bathed in a shimmering aura of spectral light, facing him. Her hair was long and dark, and

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her eyes seemed like empty holes in her face. Her thin, bronzed arms were reaching out to him....

"It can't be..." whispered Russell, his voice hoarse and full of uncontrollable fear, a fear he had never known.

Second-Papa, said Tnen-Ku. *I would have been happy. I would have been grateful to you forever. I would have come to you ... like this ... for make you happy ... not sad.*

Russell blinked, looked over at Mitzi, who was still sleeping. For an instant, he wondered why she had not heard the child; then he realized that he was only hearing the words in his mind.

"Why?" he whispered. "What do you mean? Why are you doing this?"

I would have given you this....

Russell stared at the young girl, watching her hands move slowly to her waist, to the simple knot which held the wrap-around skirt about her body. With a deliberate slowness, Tnen-Ku worked at the knot.

No! thought Russell, feeling a conflicting rush of feelings jolt him. He wanted to look away from the vision, but something held him. The shining figure had taken on a strangely erotic, yet fearsome aspect, and he was transfixed.

As the knot loosened, Russell found himself entranced by the deep tan of her flesh, and as the cloth began to slowly fall away, he became fascinated by the suggestion of flaring hips, the roundness of her soon-to-be-a woman's belly. He felt himself becoming sexually aroused as he had never in his life, and a fire seemed to be raging in his groin. Tnen-Ku held the fabric of the skirt by a small corner so that it hung limply in front of her, flanked by her naked hips and thighs.

Russell felt that he would explode from the throbbing pressure inside his trembling body, and watching her fingers release the skirt, he screamed involuntarily.

Instantly the vision of the girl disappeared, cloaking the bedroom in darkness and the echo of his scream. Mitzi had jumped up, grabbing him.

"Russell, what's the matter with you? You're soaking *wet!* What *happened?*"

Still trembling, Russell continued to stare at the foot of the bed. "Bad dream," he said weakly. "Bad dream ... I'll be okay."

But he was not okay and was never okay again.

For the first few days after the vision of Tnen-Ku, Russell Southers had convinced himself that it had not actually happened, that he had witnessed nothing more than a singularly realistic dream of some of his darker subconscious desires. He found that he could not rid his mind, however, of the disturbing image of the young girl untying her native skirt. He was thinking of her constantly as though becoming obsessed. While commuting to work, while at the office in Manhattan, and

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even at home with Mitzi watching TV, Russell was plagued by the vision of Tnen-Ku at the foot of his bed. When he concentrated on it, he could hear her voice calling out his name.

But that was only the beginning.

While watching the evening news after his daily martini, while Mitzi prepared dinner, Russell was shocked to see a bulletin teletype-overlay snake across the screen while the commentator spoke of a warehouse fire in Brooklyn:

TNEN-KU IS WATCHING YOU
SECOND-PAPA RUSSELL

"Jesus Christ!" yelled Russell, sitting straight up, staring at the TV screen, waiting for the message to roll across the bottom of the picture again. *Impossible! I didn't see it! But you* did *see it....* He felt a lump in his throat as he sat gripping the arms of his chair, waiting for a repeat of the words which did not come. He thought that he was starting to lose his sanity, and *that* scared him too. He was thinking about that little sexy brat too much, that was it. Got to stop thinking about it, that's all.

Shaken, he watched the news commentator drone on about more local happenings, but he heard little of it. He toyed with the idea of telling Mitzi what had been happening but thought that she would think he was losing his marbles. Mitzi had always depended on him to be strong and pragmatic and rational; he shuddered to think of how she would react to him showing such obvious signs of mental weakness. No, Mitzi should not know anything. Russell was going to have to handle this himself.

But it *did* bother him that Mitzi was not sharing in his ... his what? His delusions? His guilt? She was blithely rolling along, having totally forgotten the Spare the Child Program in turn for some new, fleeting, but always enjoyable project. And it was *Mitzi* who had gotten him into the whole mess in the first place. It wasn't fair, thought Russell....

That night she returned to him and he sat up in bed, transfixed and captivated by her little brown body, wrapped in a shimmering cloak of light. She held something in her hands, which she slowly placed on the covers of his bed, then quickly disappeared.

Russell's throat was so tight that he could not swallow, could not have uttered a sound if he had wanted to. His hands were trembling badly, keeping pace with the thumping of his heart and his ragged breath. His mind was slipping away from him, and he sat in the darkness, resolved to see a psychiatrist the next day. Take the afternoon off and see one of his golf partners, Dr. Venatoulis.

Then he noticed something on the covers of the bed, something where the image of the girl had placed her hands, and he felt the fear grip him again. Pushing back the sheets, Russell

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groped about on the softness of the quilt and felt something hard and solid. *What the hell...?*

It was a small, hand-carved box with a fitted top which slid open. Shaking it, something rattled inside, and he feared for a moment that the sound might awaken Mitzi. Quickly, Russell slipped out of bed and went into the bathroom, switching on the fluorescent lights around the mirror, and shutting the door. The box, when he opened it, contained scores of small white sticks, about half the size of kitchen matches, of uneven shapes. They seemed to be polished smooth and resembled ivory ... or perhaps *bone*. The thought held him for an instant as Russell stared at the box, realizing fully and for the first time that the presence of the box was physical proof that he was *not* delusional, that he was not imagining things, and that, somehow, Tnen-Ku had actually been inside his bedroom, ten thousand miles away from her island home.

No! His mind screamed out the rejection of such a thought. And yet he stared at the evidence with eyes that were starting to water and sting from nervous tension.

The little white sticks were scattered across the top of the vanity formica, and as Russell watched them, they began to move. Vibrating ever so slightly at first, tingling as if touched by a slight breeze, the bones — and Russel *knew* now that they were indeed bones — moved like iron filings over a magnet to form a caricature of a skull.

Screaming involuntarily, he swept the pieces off the counter scattering them across the bathroom tile. It was getting too crazy, too unbelievable!

"Russell, is that you...!" Mitzi was knocking loudly at the bathroom door.

"No! ... I mean, yes, it's me! Who the hell do you think it would be!"

"Russell, are you all right? What's the matter with you?" Mitzi tried the knob, but it was locked. "Russell?!"

"Oh Christ, *what?!* Yes, Mitzi, I'm all right. Go back to bed, will you please? I've got an upset stomach that's all:..."

"I thought I heard you scream, Russell, are you okay? Why is the door locked? You *never* lock the bathroom door, Russell."

"I've got some bad gas pains, that's all. I — I didn't want to disturb you, honey. I'll be out in a minute."

He looked down to the floor and saw that the little bones had been moving while he spoke to his wife, gathering themselves together like a small herd of animals. They were arranging themselves into letters, like tiny runic symbols, which at first were indecipherable. But the more Russell stared at the configurations, he could read the message that was forming:

He wanted to scream again, and he held the sound in his throat only by the

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greatest force of will. He could taste bile at the back of his mouth as he bent down and scooped up all the little white pieces, throwing them into the toilet and flushing it repeatedly, until all the bones were sucked into the small procelain maelstrom.

Luckily, when he returned to bed, Mitzi was already asleep.

He could not bring himself to tell his wife about the delusions he had been suffering, and he was ashamed to call up a psychiatrist, especially someone he played golf with on occasion. Since no real, hard evidence, no *proof* actually existed, Russell had convinced himself that what had been happening to him was the product of an overworked mind, a heavily wracked, guilty conscience, and too much displaced imagination. And so he tried to ignore the messages which Tnen-Ku sent him: the warning headline on the *New York Post* which disappeared when he picked up the paper from the subway newsstand; the skull-like configuration of the coffee grounds in his cup at Nedick's in Grand Central; the pair of dark eyes which seemed to be staring at him through the glass of the speedometer of his Monte Carlo; the familiar, half-whispering voice that he thought he could hear in the telephone in between the beeps of the touch-tone dial; the movie marquee he glanced at from the corner of his eye on 56th Street, which for a moment, until he had looked for a second time, had said: "Tnen-Ku Is Coming!"

Normally Russell Southers would have been greatly disturbed by the portents and omens jumping up unexpectedly from all parts of his everyday life. But he was becoming almost accustomed to the preternatural for one simple reason: he was losing his mind. Simply and totally. He just didn't care anymore.

Let her come, goddamn it! he thought as he rode the train home that night. *Let her come, 'cause I'm sure as shit ready for her....*

The conductor called out his stop, and he stood up in ritual-commuter fashion, single-filing out of the car and onto the platform with his fellow riders. Descending the staircase to the parking lot below, Russell scanned the amassed cars for his white Monte Carlo where Mitzi would be waiting to pick him up. It was wedged in between a big Ford station wagon and a TR-7, and as Russell approached the familiar vehicle he was shocked to see the dark eyes and long straight hair of Tnen-Ku watching him from behind the wheel. His first impulse was to stop in shock and surprise, but instead he forced himself to walk naturally, even waving and smiling as he approached the car. Better, he thought, to not let the little snit think she had rattled him. He would take the element of surprise and twist it back into her face. Surely the girl would not expect him to act so naturally.

He tried to keep thoughts of Mitzi

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from his mind, tried to not think about what that young brat might have done with his wife so that she could be replaced behind the wheel. No, it was better to concentrate on what must be done....

"Hello, Second-Papa Russell..." she said as he opened the passenger's side door and slid in beside her.

She was smiling and leaning forward as though she would like him to kiss her. *The little tramp!* Russell looked past her face to her slim neck, then reached out and wrapped his fingers around it. As he began to squeeze and he felt her struggle helplessly under his grip, he smiled slowly, feeling a wellspring of elation bubble through his mind.

"I've got you!" he screamed. "I've got you now, and you won't get away this time!"

Tnen-Ku opened her mouth, no longer a tart, sly curve to her young lips, but a silent circle of panic and pain. Russell tightened his grip on her neck and began to yank her back and forth. His hands and forearms were enveloped in a numbness, an absence of sensation, as though he were watching someone else's hands strangling the darkly tanned woman-child.

As her face seemed to become bloated and puffy, the color of her cheeks turning grey and her bottomless eyes bulging whitely, Russell's other senses seemed to desert him. The lights from the station parking lot grew dim, and he could barely discern the features of the dying face in front of him. He could hear nothing but the pounding of his own pulse behind his ears and was not aware of the excited shouts of people who were crowding around his Monte Carlo. Nor did he feel the strong, capable hands grabbing him, separating him from his dead wife, pulling him from the car.

Hitting the hard surface of the parking lot, Russell looked up at the ragged oval of faces peering down at him. Someone called for the police as he lay still, feeling the shadows of evening and fear crawl across his eyes. When the sound of the sirens pierced the night, Russell began to scream, spiraling down into the mind-darkness of defeat.

Somewhere in Manhattan, someone opened to a full-page ad in *The Times Magazine*.

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Timothy Zahn writes that he was born in Chicago in 1951, received a B.S. and M.S. in physics from Michigan State and the University of Illinois, and now resides with his wife in Champaign, Illinois. Several of his stories have appeared in Analog; *his first* F&SF *story concerns a planet called Drym and an uneasy alliance between humans and a unique life form.*

Houseguest

BY

TIMOTHY ZAHN

The fuzzy red ball that was Drym's sun hung low in the sky, and already the temperature had started its nightly descent. Measuring the angle between sun and mountains, Wynne Kendal estimated he had a good fifteen minutes to get home before sunset brought on the dangerous, highly energetic "musth" part of the tricorn activity cycle. He was all right though; across the shallow stream just ahead was the ruin of his original prefab home, and it was only a ten-minute walk from there to the House.

As always, he glanced at the ruin as he passed. Little had changed in the past eight months; the tricorns had pretty thoroughly trampled the plastic and metal structure the first week after he abandoned it and now, having driven him away, generally ignored it.

"Bastards," he muttered, the oath expanding to include both the tricorns and the Company exploration group who had given Drym a fast once-over and blithely declared it safe. Perhaps if they'd hung around long enough, the tricorns would have turned on *them* instead of waiting until the mining group was settled and out of communication to turn from docile to nasty. Clearly, though, the survey had been a mere formality; with rich concentrations of precious scandium-bearing ores lying barely beneath the planetary surface, the Company would have sent miners in even if Drym had been covered with Bellatrix sparkbrats.

Ahead of Kendal loomed a line of granite hills, and he could now make out the five-meter-high rocky dome and gaping circular entrance of his House. His heartbeat never failed to pick up slightly at this point; there was no way of telling from here which of its moods the other would be in, and

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some of them could be dangerous. Not that it made any real difference, of course. Staying outside alone all night would be even worse.

The sun was just grazing the mountain tops as he reached the House. A few meters to one side of the dome was a hill with one flat face. A large stone rested against it, and Kendal manhandled it aside to expose the tiny cave he used for storage. He withdrew his night-pack, rations, and stove, brushing off with quick motions a few bloodworms who were clinging to the bundles. The mining team had briefly entertained the idea of living in caves after realizing their prefabs had no chance against the tricorns, but the bloodworms had ended that hope. Human tissue was supposed to be completely non-nourishing to Drym fauna, something the planet's flying insects seemed to sense from a distance. The cave-dwelling bloodworms, unfortunately, each needed a few bites to catch on.

The last item Kendal withdrew from the cave was a telescoping duryai alloy pole, originally a part of the miners' shoring equipment. He extended it to the two-meter length required and gave it a quick visual check before stuffing his mining gear into the cave and resealing it. Picking up his packs, he lugged them to the House's entrance, setting them down outside. Taking a deep breath, he held the pole out in front of him like a spear and, ducking slightly, entered the House.

It was not quite pitch-dark inside, but the light from the setting sun showed only that Kendal was in a dome-shaped space two meters high in the middle and perhaps four across at the ground. A strange, almost musky odor filled the air; strong, but not overpowering. Watching the walls warily, Kendal walked toward the center. "Hello, House," he called tentatively.

The answer came promptly and in a tone so low Kendal could feel it as much as he could hear it: "Greetings, *master.*"

Kendal breathed a little easier. The House was only sarcastic when it was in a relatively good mood. It had probably fed today, he decided, setting one end of his pole into a notch dug in the hard clay of the floor and carefully wedging the other end against the ceiling. Only when that was done did he finally relax. Wasting no time, he retrieved his packs and brought them into the House. Flicking on a lantern, he nodded. "Okay, you can close up now," he said, sitting down cross-legged near the pole.

"Very well, *master,*" the House rumbled, and the circular orifice squeezed shut in a way that always reminded Kendal of someone pursing his lips.

"Thank you," he said as he started to set up his stove. "How was your day?"

"How should it have been?" the House responded. "I spoke for a time with the Others, and I waited. There is

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little else I can do."

"You *did* eat, though," Kendal commented. He'd spotted a small rocky bulge high up on the wall that hadn't been there when he'd left. "A white-wing, wasn't it?"

"Yes. It was small, but will have to serve. You Men have seen to that."

Kendal winced. In their self-defense killing of tricorns, the miners were apparently causing a serious threat to the Houses' main food supply. Along with the humiliation of having been turned into living bedrooms, this was just one more cause for resentment. And if they got mad enough ... Kendal shuddered at the memory of the crushed bodies of the first handful of miners to innocently venture into the Houses. They had never known what hit them. If the exploration team had goofed on their analysis of the tricorns, they had missed the Houses completely, and it had cost seven lives before anyone figured out what was happening. Another four men were lost before the shoring pole technique was perfected. Like other creatures throughout history, the Houses had proved at least marginally tamable, and were taught by short laser bursts to open and close their "mouths" in response to slaps or light kicks. No one had been prepared, though, when the Houses started talking to them.

Kendal's communicator buzzed. "Kendal; yeah?"

"Tan here. You locked up for the night?"

"Sure am." Cardman Tan had been the Number Three man of the mining team before the tricorns and Houses had taken their massive toll; now, he was Number One. "Any particular reason why you're doing a bedcheck tonight?"

"I saw what looked like a new bevy of tricorns coming over the hills in your area a few minutes ago," Tan explained. "I wanted to make sure nobody was wandering around outside."

More tricorns in the area. Damn. "Thanks for the warning. I'll be careful."

"See you tomorrow." The communicator clicked off.

The House was silent as Kendal turned back and finished his dinner preparations. It had listened to the conversation, of course, and certainly understood the implications. Theoretically, more tricorns meant more food for all the Houses scattered among the hills — but only if the bull-sized beasts came within sniffing range of the odor lures the Houses used. If the tricorns chose instead to hound the men at the mine two kilometers away, there wasn't a solitary thing the Houses could do about it. Their "roots" — Kendal's House's own word — went deep into the ground, drawing out water and dissolved rock for their organo-mineral metabolisms. And while no one knew how deep the roots went, it was for sure that the Houses weren't going out hunting.

"I wonder how many tricorns are

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in this new bevy," Kendal remarked as he ate, just to break the silence.

"Forty-seven," the House said promptly.

Kendal looked up in surprise. "You've seen them?"

"They passed near one of the Others a short time ago. He counted them."

"I see." Kendal hadn't realized he'd been that preoccupied; usually he could feel the underground vibrations the Houses used to talk with each other. "Well, hopefully this group will stay close to the hills, where you can have a shot at them."

"No. They will surely continue their attempts to drive you away from here."

The House's tone was no longer sarcastic, and Kendal swallowed hard. At their friendliest, the Houses were barely tolerant of their human parasites. At other times ... Kendal glanced involuntarily at the pole, making sure it was properly placed. "Now, House, you know we don't kill the tricorns because we want to. We'd be happy to live and let live. I know you're not crazy about putting up with us —" the understatement of the decade — "but if you can hold out just another hundred and fifty days or so, our company's transport ship will come and visit us. They'll have the knowledge and equipment to build us homes that the tricorns can't destroy — maybe even find a way to keep the tricorns away from us without having to kill them. Then maybe we can make up for all the inconveniences we've caused you."

The House didn't answer. Kendal chewed his lip. He'd been planning to play chess with one of the other miners this evening via communicator, but it might pay him to talk to his House instead. The Houses had very little opportunity for mental stimulation, and Kendal had found that an interesting chat could often snap his out of a bad mood. "Did I ever tell you about my year on Majori?" he asked casually. "That planet had some of the strangest animals I've ever seen. There was one, for instance, with three legs — or five, depending on how you counted them."

He stopped and waited. "Please explain," the House said at last, a touch of interest peeking through the surliness in its tone.

Inwardly, Kendal smiled. Just like offering candy to a child. And almost as effective. Some of the miners, he knew, treated their Houses like slaves or virtually ignored them, but Kendal had always tried to stay on friendly terms with his. All other reasons aside, it helped relieve the boredom of Drym's nights. "It's like this...."

The conversation lasted far into the night.

Kendal's alarm went off a half hour before dawn, and the sun was barely up as the miners began the day's work. Early morning was their most productive time; for several hours after sun-

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rise the tricorns hid away among the rocks and hills, presumably sleeping, and for that period no guards had to be posted to protect the others from attack. When the giant creatures did finally lumber forth, it took fully half of the forty men to stand guard around the perimeter of the wide, shallow strip mine. A smaller mine would have been easier to defend, but to carry the ore out of a deeper pit would have been agony. All of their powered equipment ran off of standard energy cells, and the decision had been made months ago to save as much power as possible for the hand lasers. Tricorns took a lot of energy to kill.

For a while the miners made good progress, despite the early-morning chill. As the morning passed and temperatures rose, the tricorns began to congregate around the mine. Two of them had to be shot before the rest got the idea and thereafter kept at a respectful distance from the ring of guards. There seemed to be more of them than usual, Kendal thought — the new bevy was getting into the spirit of this thing with remarkable speed.

"Of course they are," Jaker, the man standing guard to Kendal's right, said when Kendal commented on it. "They're at least as intelligent as dogs or wolves."

"No way," another man down the line called back.

Kendal sighed. That argument had been going on for months now, with Jaker and Welles the main participants. Kendal himself leaned toward Jaker's side — the tall miner's reasoning usually made sense to him — but he was getting sick of the whole debate. What *he* wanted to know was something no one here could even take a stab at: why were the *Houses* so intelligent? What possible reason was there for an unmoving pile of rock to develop the intelligence necessary to learn an alien language just by listening to communicator conversations? In addition, Kendal had proved — at least to his own satisfaction — that the Houses were capable of imagination and abstract thought. The *how* of it was reasonably straightforward: current theory implied that a sufficiently large brain would automatically develop sentience, and the Houses were certainly big enough to hold a brain that size. But the *why* of it still drove him crazy.

Jaker and Welles were still arguing when Kendal tuned his mind back to the conversation. "Look at how fast these new ones figured out the lasers —" Jaker was saying.

A motion to Kendal's right caught his eye. One of the tricorns was moving forward. "Jaker!" he snapped, yanking his laser from its holster.

Jaker had been half-turned to shout at Welles; whipping back around, he brought his own weapon to bear, firing a second after Kendal's shot grazed the massive skull near the leftmost of the three serrated horns. The creature thudded to the ground; two more shots and it was dead.

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Kendal turned back quickly to see a tricorn directly in front of him take a couple of heavy steps forward. He raised his laser, and the animal stopped. Almost reluctantly, it backed up to its original position.

"See?" Jaker said, just the slightest tremor in his voice. "They know when it's not safe to attack."

"All right, can it," Cardman Tan called from the pit, where the sounds of work had ceased. "Jaker, you give your brain a vacation like that again and I'll have your hide — if one of the tricorns doesn't get it first. That goes for all the rest of you, too. Stay *alert*, damnit!"

There were muffled acknowledgments from the guard ring. Wiping a layer of sweat from his neck, Kendal reflected that the strain of the past eight months was starting to be felt. He wondered if they would be able to hold out for five more.

The huge bins that had been set up nearby to store the ore had been designed to handle over a hundred tons each. As a result they were almost, but not quite, strong enough to be proof against the nighttime tricorn rampages; and when it came time to load the day's production, it was found that one of the conveyors had taken one too many dents and was inoperable. Loading the gravel via the remaining two naturally took more time than had been allowed, and as a result it was already after sundown before Kendal started for home. Even then his luck almost held, and he was nearly to the House before a tricorn caught his scent and charged.

Kendal's instinctive urge was to make a dash for it, but he knew a tricorn in musth could outrun him. So instead he stood his ground, laser on full power, and waited until he couldn't miss before firing. The shot hit directly between the deep-set eyes. Dodging to one side, Kendal fired again and again into the creature as its headlong rush carried it past him to crash against the side of the House.

Keeping one eye on the motionless tricorn, Kendal quickly collected his equipment and went inside. "Hello, House."

"You killed it," the deep voice said accusingly.

"Uh, yeah. Sorry, but I didn't have much choice in the matter."

"You could have let me lure it to me."

Kendal didn't answer. Whether or not the House's odor lure could have distracted the tricorn was an academic question: Kendal couldn't have let the House eat it in any case. After crushing a victim, the House digested it by forming a thin film of rock under it, attaching it to the House's own ceiling, after which it could be absorbed. But until the film was completed, the ceiling had to remain down — and for an animal the size of a tricorn the process could take a half-hour. Kendal couldn't risk being outside that long at night.

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"Again, I'm sorry," he said at last. "There were a lot of tricorns out by the mine today. Maybe one will come out here tomorrow."

The House remained silent. Feeling uncomfortably like a rich man having a picnic in a slum, Kendal fixed his dinner and ate. He tried three or four times to strike up a conversation with the House, but his questions elicited only monosyllabic responses, and eventually he gave up. Settling down instead with one of his handful of books, he read for a while and then turned in.

The tricorn he had shot was still lying against the House when Kendal cautiously emerged the next dawn. A quick check showed that the animal had probably been dead on impact; Kendal's head shot had fried its brains. A thought struck him, and when he had finished stowing his nighttime things, he assembled his rock-cutter plasma-jet torch and returned to the carcass. A typical tricorn weighed in at something near a ton, and for once Kendal was glad that the tricorns' nocturnal activities made it unsafe to leave tools at the mine. The torch sliced the rock-hard carcass in half with only a little trouble; and by using the shoring pole as a lever, he managed to roll the pieces to the House's orifice. "House?" he called "I've got some food here for you. Wait until I get both parts inside before closing up, okay?"

A minute later the job was done. "Thank you," the House said, a little too grudgingly for Kendal's taste. The orifice puckered closed, and Kendal heard the dull thud as the domed ceiling came down with the force of a rock crusher.

"Any time," Kendal muttered as he turned and headed off toward the mine. That altruistic act had cost him time, energy, and a fair amount of power, and he was annoyed that the House wasn't more appreciative. But it didn't really matter that much. If feeding it put the House back in a reasonably good mood, it would be worth the trouble.

The day's work was uneventful, and Kendal was in good spirits as he returned home. "Hello, House," he called his usual greeting as he set the pole snugly in place.

There was no answer. "House?" he tried again. "You all right?"

As if in response, the orifice closed, sealing Kendal in. He breathed a little easier, his worst fear assuaged: clearly, the House was still alive. But why wasn't it speaking to him? He searched the walls with his eyes, looking for some clue. Two bulges in the wall near the orifice were undoubtedly the remains of the tricorn he'd killed; otherwise everything seemed as usual.

No, not quite. Kendal felt a shiver go up his back as he felt the vibrations through the soles of his boots. The House was talking to his fellow scattered through the hills. It was a normal enough occurrence — except that he

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knew that the House could handle two conversations at once when it wanted to. Clearly — painfully clearly — Kendal was being ignored.

Determined not to let it throw him, he prepared his dinner and afterwards tried to read. But he found it impossible to concentrate in the increasingly hostile atmosphere he could feel around him. More than once he actually considered spending the night outside, but common sense and stubbornness killed that idea. The House was simply in a bad mood, he told himself firmly as he finally switched off his lantern for the night.

The vibrations were still going when he fell asleep.

The glowing numbers of his alarm chrono showed three hours till dawn when Kendal woke with a start. For a moment he lay still, slightly disoriented, as he tried to figure out what had awakened him. Then he heard it: a gentle creaking of metal. Rolling over, Kendal switched on his lantern, his other hand snatching up his laser.

The sight that greeted his squinting eyes shocked him to full consciousness. In the center of the room the shoring pole was bowed a good thirty centimeters out of line in response to the newly convex shape of the ceiling. For a long minute the tableau seemed frozen, and Kendal could almost hear the House straining against the pole. Then, reluctantly, the ceiling gave way, returning to its original position as the pole straightened out.

Kendal found his voice. "House! What are you doing?" he called sharply.

His only answer was a sudden bulging of the wall just above the floor, forming an instant torus whose purpose, he knew, was to shove anything that had been near the wall toward the center where the main crushing force would be exerted. The torus withdrew, and once again the ceiling came down in an effort to break the pole.

"House!" Kendal shouted again, a touch of fear creeping into his voice. Had the House gone crazy? "House! Answer me!"

"You cannot be allowed to live any longer."

Kendal's heart jerked at the words. "Why? What have we done to you?"

"Do not act innocent. You have forced us to your will, killed our food. And now you have offered me food that is almost useless. I can bear no more."

Almost useless? "House, that tricorn was freshly killed. You know that. Look, it couldn't have rotted that fast, especially at night." There was no answer except another squeeze on the pole. "Hey, come on, be reasonable. You know you can't break that pole."

"So the Others also believe. But once I have proved it can be done, they will join me in killing their parasites, too."

Kendal felt cold all over. His com-

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municator was resting near the far wall, where he couldn't retrieve it without risking the explosive ballooning which could easily hurl him into the pole. And, anyway, what good would it do to alert the other miners? Kendal's House would hear the message, the other Houses would hear it, and it would just precipitate the attacks a little ahead of scheudle. And then ... what? All the miners had lasers, but no one had the faintest idea how to kill or disable a House. "Look, can't we talk this over?" he called. "If I gave you bad food, I didn't mean to, and I apologize."

The torus bulged outward and flattened, and the ceiling came down. To Kendal it looked like the pole was bending a little further with each attack. If the House kept at it, it would succeed — and probably long before Kendal could cut his way through the orifice with his laser.

"House!" he tried again, desperately. "You don't want to do this. Remember how bored you all were before we came? — you told me that yourself. We can tell you about places and things you've never seen, teach you about science and —"

"It is not enough," the House interrupted. "Knowledge is of no use to us if we don't have enough food."

It was, Kendal realized, as good as a death sentence. As long as the House needed tricorns as part of their diet, and the tricorns themselves were so hostile to the miners —

The inspiration that abruptly struck could hardly be described as blinding. It was a hunch only, and the plan it evoked was nothing short of foolhardy. But Kendal was desperate. "Wait a minute, House. If we can supply live tricorns for your food, will you let us live here until our ship comes?"

The House, halfway into another crushing attempt, seemed to pause. "What trick is this?"

"No trick. I think I may know how to control the tricorns."

"I don't believe you."

"All right, I'll prove it." Kendal took a deep breath. "I'll go out right now and bring one back for you."

There was a long silence. "Very well," the House said slowly. "I will let you out. But you will leave your lightning-maker and talker here as proof that you will return."

The tone left no room for argument. "Okay," Kendal agreed at last. Going outside without his laser might be possible for the distance he would need to cover. Anyway, there was no choice.

The House's orifice opened, sending in a rush of cold air. "Go."

Swallowing hard, Kendal steeled himself and stepped outside into the dim light from Drym's three moons. Pausing only long enough to check for nearby tricorns, he set off at a fast jog in the direction of the mine. He had already done a quick mental inventory of the mining equipment in the nearby

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cave, and there was nothing there that had both the power and range to serve as an effective weapon. Speed and luck would have to do.

The three moons gave off a respectable amount of light, and as Kendal's eyes adjusted, he discovered he could see most of the plain ahead. Tricorns dotted the landscape, cropping tufts of grass-like plants, digging their snouts into the ground, or running about with triple their daytime speed. Kendal felt his jaw tighten at the thought of passing among the deadly beasts. But he was committed now. He stopped briefly to establish the wind direction and, struck by a thought, stripped off his outer jacket, wadding it into a ball for easy carrying. Picking a path that would put him downwind of as many of the tricorns as possible, he set off at a fast trot.

His luck held for perhaps three minutes. Then, a traveling tricorn happened to pass downwind of him and changed its path abruptly.

Kendal put on a burst of speed, even though his lungs were already beginning to ache from the frigid air. It was no use; even with his lead, he was being steadily run down. Gritting his teeth, he waited until the tricorn was almost upon him. Then, in one quick motion, he unrolled his jacket and threw it across the animal's face. The tricorn broke stride and tossed its massive head, throwing the jacket to the ground. From the corner of his eye Kendal saw it turn to worry the garment; then he turned his attention forward. His goal was just ahead: the stream that flowed past the ruin of his old prefab. He turned a bit upstream, making for a place where the stream widened into a relatively deep pool. Two tricorns, he saw, were drinking there, but they were upwind of him, and neither turned as he approached. He was almost to the water's edge when a motion to his right caught his eye. Another tricorn was charging.

Kendal had no choice. Running full tilt between the drinking tricorns, he leaped into the pool.

The shock of the icy water was paralyzing, and Kendal's legs instantly knotted into agonizing cramps. Fortunately, the water was less than a meter deep. So keeping his head above the surface posed no major problem. Rubbing hard with hands already growing numb with the cold, he managed to work out the cramps and to get his clothes off, tossing them to the far side of the stream. Then, conscious of the speed at which his body heat was being sucked from him, he began to wash himself as quickly and thoroughly as possible. A few minutes was all he could stand; even as he waded ashore he was staggering with the beginnings of hypothermia. The wind cut into his naked skin like nothing he'd ever felt before, and his whole body was racked with violent shivering, but he hardly noticed — his full attention was on the three tricorns now eying him. Docile and harmless, the Company explora-

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tion group had called them. Mentally crossing his fingers, Kendal stepped forward.

None of them made any move except to follow him with their eyes. Gingerly, Kendal reached out and laid his hand against the head of the closest animal. Two openings in its neck — its nostrils, Kendal had long ago decided — flared once, but otherwise it didn't seem to object to the familiarity. Kendal withdrew his hand, and after a moment the animals returned to their drinking.

So his hunch had been right. But Kendal had no time for self-congratulation. He turned and headed back toward his House, keeping his eyes open. He was nearly there when he found what he was looking for: a grazing tricorn whose sides were heaving with the breathlessness of a long run. Walking boldly up to it, Kendal carefully gripped one of the horns and tugged. The action had no effect; if the tricorn was winded and therefore not inclined to run away, neither was it going to interrupt its grazing. Kendal tried again, then gave up and went instead to several nearby clumps of vegetation, pulling up the plants until he had a good handful of them. Returning to the tricorn, he waited until the animal had finished eating and then waved one of the plants in front of it. The tricorn bit off a piece, and when Kendal slowly backed away it willingly followed him.

They reached the House with two or three of the plants left. Dropping them onto the ground for the tricorn, Kendal stepped to the open orifice. "I'm back," he said through chattering teeth. "As you see, I've brought you some food."

"I see, but do not understand," the House said, its emotion unreadable.

"Never mind that for now. I'm going to come in now and get my stuff. You'll be able then to lure the tricorn in. Okay?"

"Yes." A pause. "Can you do this again?"

"I'll make a deal with you. If you and the other Houses will let us live inside you safely until our ship comes, we'll guarantee you each at least one tricorn every three days; maybe more. What do you say?"

"I agree," the House said promptly.

"You promised them *what?*" Cardman Tan said, eyes wide with disbelief. "Are you crazy, Kendal?"

Muffled to the eyebrows in his spare clothing and still just barely recovered from his overnight chilling, Kendal nevertheless managed to keep his temper. Tan was not dumb, but he'd clearly missed the significance of Kendal's account of his predawn activities. "Not crazy at all, Tan. With the proper precautions we can handle the tricorns."

"Look, I don't know how you lucked out last night, but you can't count on the tricorns always being in a good mood like that."

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"Moods have nothing to do with it. It's the dust."

"Besides, we — what? What dust?"

"The rock dust from the mine. Remember the exploration group report on the tricorns?"

"Sure," Tan said bitterly. "Lousy rubber-stamping toadies —"

"Forget that. They were right. The tricorns aren't interested in *us* — they're attracted to the rock dust that sticks to our skin and clothes. Apparently they eat one or more of the minerals we dig up at the mine."

Tan opened his mouth, closed it again, and suddenly looked thoughtful. "That would explain why they hang around the mine all day and stomp through it at night. But why? And how come we've never caught them at it?"

"We *have*, or at least I have," Kendal pointed out. "I always assumed they were digging up small plants, myself. Anyway, most of their feeding's done at night, I think." He shrugged. "And why shouldn't they eat rock? We know the Houses have organo-mineral metabolisms — it only makes sense for the tricorns to be similar?"

"Well ... okay, suppose you're right. What then?"

"I thought you'd never ask. Here's my idea...."

It was a real pleasure, Kendal decided, to be able to head for home without that tense uncertainty as to what kind of reception he'd get. Now that it was being fed regularly, the House was consistently cooperative and — following the pattern of human societies through the ages — was beginning to take more and more interest in abstract and intellectual matters. The other Houses were behaving similarly, causing both surprise and some uneasiness among the miners and rekindling the old debates over the usefulness and origin of House intelligence. Kendal kept out of the arguments; the truth, he suspected, would only disturb them more.

His first stop was the corral behind his House. Fenced in by wire mesh attached to pipes, the four tricorns looked back disinterestedly as they munched on the rock and plants left there for them. The fence couldn't keep them in at night, of course, but with a supply of food nearby they tended to stay put even during musth, and the one or two who had broken out in the last month had always returned by sunrise. Collecting food for them was a pain — as was supplying the mineral pile near the mine to lure away the tricorns there — but it beat guard duty hands-down. And in the long run, it was much cheaper.

Collecting his night things, Kendal stepped into the House. "Hi, House," he called.

"Good evening, Kendal. Did you have a profitable day?"

"Very. Will you be ready to start after I get my supper going?"

"Certainly."

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We are, after all, what we eat, Kendal thought wryly — and if his theory was right, that was even more true of Houses. Their alien method of food absorption seemed to be gentler than its human equivalent, so much so that the Houses could evidently absorb intact the delicate and complex nucleic acids — or possibly even entire gray-matter nerve cells — of their prey. And as soon as enough had been absorbed.... Kendal wondered how many tricorns the House had had to eat before the unexpected light had dawned so long ago. Intact tricorns, that is — not ones whose brains had been fried by laser fire.

Accidental intelligence? Something inside Kendal rebelled at the idea ... and yet, why not? And hardly useless, even if it had been sorely lacking in purpose until now.

Because there was one intriguing corollary to the theory. The Houses certainly had the necessary bulk to store great quantities of brain cells. If they were steadily fed, would their intelligence increase? And if so, was there any upper limit?

Kendal didn't know, and of course didn't have the necessary equipment or know-how to perform rigorous tests. But there were more informal ways ... and he was determined to learn whatever he could in the time remaining.

The equipment was ready now. Looking up, Kendal nodded. "Okay, go ahead."

The reply was immediate; the House knew this part well. "Pawn to king four," it said.

Coming Soon

Next month: HIGH STEEL, a deep-space sf thriller by **Jack Dann** and **Jack C. Haldeman;** COMMANDER IN THE MIST, a brand new Brigadier Ffellowes story by **Sterling E. Lanier;** UNDERSTANDING HUMAN BEHAVIOR: A ROMANCE OF THE ROCKIES an unclassifiable and fine novelet by **Thomas M. Disch.**

Soon: New stories by **Edward Bryant, Michael Shea, R. Bretnor, Brian W. Aldiss, Damon Knight, George Alec Effinger, Charles L. Grant, Richard Cowper, Avram Davidson, Felix Gotschalk, Alan Dean Foster, Lee Killough** and many others.

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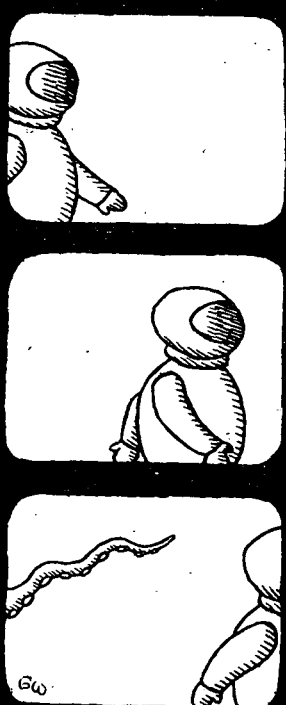
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

LEAD BALLOON

The movie *Heavy Metal*'s ad campaign touted it as "Beyond Science Fiction" which, having seen it, is a great relief to me. I'd hate to have anyone thinking this *is* science fiction. French culture has provided us with many wonderful things, from Ravel to Jacques Tati to yogurt, but the French have also in this century had a lamentable tendency to take some aspect of Anglo-American pop culture, imitate it in its flashiest, most superficial form, inject some ooh-la-la pseudosophisticated sexual innuendo, and re-export it. An example is their idea of "le jazz hot," and they have done the same to science fiction.

Ever since Grandma Barbarella first stripped down, the French idea of s/f has been confined, judging by what has been exported, to comics with a heavy dose of sex and violence. The comic question has been considered recently in this space *re Excalibur*, but let me reiterate the point that s/f is a literature of complex concepts, and complex concepts are pretty hard to get across in the limited space of balloons and captions. (What written French s/f I've read of recent vintage seems to be balloons and captions strung together with descriptions of non-existent pictures; on the other hand, it's always unfair to judge translations.)

As for sex and violence, it's hard to come out against either these days without being labelled a member of the

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moral majority. There are still some of us, however, an amoral minority perhaps, who prefer their sex and violence *artfully* handled if those elements are going to be used, like anything else. Their mere presence does not justify their being there, nor does condemning them for being obvious, crude, and just plain boring at this point in a permissive era amount to a cry for censorship.

For the benefit of those readers who do, indeed, read their science fiction and don't just look at it, the *dernier cri* of French s/f is a magazine called *Métal Hurlant*, which has now been brought to the screen with appropriate fanfare as an animated feature.

I don't think of myself as being very often at a loss for words, but in the face of *Heavy Metal*, I am that. It is very difficult to formulate anything sensible to say about something that is utter, witless nonsense. It practically commands total inarticulateness.

So far as I could figure out, the movie is an anthology of incidents in the career of a glowing green ball that is menacing a little girl and telling her the highlights of its existence — which is about the nastiest thing it could do to the poor kid, considering the contents of its stories. The glowing green ball is Not Nice and wants to be Master of the Universe — *why* a glowing green ball wants to be Master of the Universe is not made clear. There's little point in going into the various pieces that comprise this whole that's less than its parts; the GGB is worked into them very awkwardly, the visual style is familiar if you've looked at the magazine, and the contents range from horror (unintentional, that is) through soggy sword and sorcery to pseudo-psience fiction ("Beyond Science Fiction," remember? — well, a miss is as good as a mile, says I).

Traditionally, the heaviest metal is lead, and leaden is a good word for this movie. Let's lobby for the return of Barbarella —she at least had some wit — or better yet, Jules Verne.

(Did you know that Barbarella met Captain Nemo in a 1972 strip? How's that for useful information?)

Literary Dept.... There's a book from New York Zoetrope (that's a publisher) called *The Art of the Movie Heavy Metal*. Now *there's* a contradiction in terms! ... More seriously, from T.I.S. Publications, Volume 1 of what looks to be a staggeringly impressive project, *A Reference Guide To American Science Fiction Films* by A.W. Strickland and Forrest J. Ackerman. This initial volume covers 1897 to 1929, is illustrated with full page b&w photos, and is frustratingly wonderful to browse through — can you live without seeing *Dr. Pyckle and Mr. Pride*, starring Stan Laurel? Enquiries (about the book, not Dr. Pyckle) can be sent to T.I.S., Box 1998, Bloomington, Ind. 47402, or check your nearest specialty shop.

* * *

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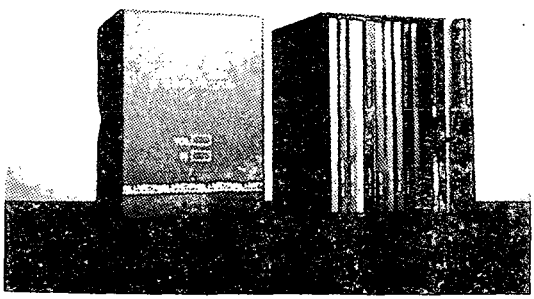
Tape and disc.... Speaking of Verne, Disney's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (great squid, great Nautilus, not much else) is available on disc now as well as tape ... New on tape is *Somewhere In Time*, for which I am very grateful. I missed it on release, caught up with it on cassette, and loved it. Cliche plot of all time — man falls in love with picture, goes back in time to find girl. The time travel aspect leaves a few loose ends, but there is a small circular-time incident which is inspired, and the film is a feast for hopelessly unreconstructed Romantics like myself. Two of the most beautiful people around, Christopher Reeve and Jane Seymour, don't hinder matters, nor does a lushly old-fashioned score that uses Rachmaninoff with taste.

Things-to-come dept.... From England, word of an intriguing film that may have opened by the time this sees print. *Time Bandits*, made by the Monty Python crowd, or Through History With Sean Connery, Ralph Richardson, John Cleese, Michael Palin, David Warner, Shelley Duvall, and other unlikely people.



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From Richard Grant: "I was a Coast Guard officer for five years, until 1979 when I quit to try to make a living as a writer. I've sold to NEW DIMENSIONS and was hired to do a screenplay adaptation of C.J. Cherryh's GATE OF IVREL. I'm just finishing work on what might be called a society novel, set in the Virginia hunt country."

The Dream Executioner

BY
RICHARD GRANT

Silent, spined with struts like some fantastic deep-sea creature floating in its pool of darkness, the vast fortress hung geosynchronously above the castle-city of Quath, where the prince lay in chains. For all its vastness, the fortress was invisible to even the most magnified eye stargazing from the turreted heights below; its solar-scaled surface absorbed the starlight where it fell. Only the fins of its heatsink, emitting a bright infrared aura between jutting spikes and tubes, betrayed its constant presence. But alone of the inhabitants of Quath the spindly, night-foraging swamptrotters (prized for their pearly eggs) were equipped to sense that menacing halo — and their glottal warbling gave nothing away.

Millennia had writhed by while the fortress hung silent and still. Below, out of ubiquitous bogs and wetlands, the people of Quath dragged their mountainous castle stone by slimy stone. Interrupted by plague and famine, internecine intrigue and occasional regicide, the rude battlements rose slowly higher. Labyrinthine passages and cavernous gathering-places sprawled randomly out across the muddy plain. Still the fortress above gave no hint of its presence, no clue to the point of its vigil.

Now the prince lay in chains: a young man merely, self-named Popohca.

The princess twice refused a summons to appear before the High Council.

Murmurings filled the castle-city of Quath. Even the children playing in terraced courtyards sensed the gray mist of foreboding that had settled about the thick stone walls.

In the fortress overhead there might have been a stirring. Vague, tentative:

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a ghostly shadow of the troubles below. But this was a subtlety within greater subtleties, and below in the yellow-green sunlight the shadows had crisp edges, and what dangers might exist were apparent, or seemed to be.

"Will the Prince die, Teacher?" asked a pale child whose golden hair fluffed with the damp breeze.

His twenty or so fellows twisted where they sat to hear the old man's reply. From all sides of the little square, sounds of the castle's restless life impinged. The Teacher sat, shaven-headed as a token of his years and erudition, beneath a squat feather-tree whose sinuous roots had found their way into crevices of the underlying stone (for this was in the oldest part of the castle, where dirt had not been hauled to pad the rugged surfaces). He took a moment to frame his reply, for these were very tiny children to whom every chance remark was a new gospel, a thing for contemplation and the germ of wild childish legends. After a time he said:

"He may die, child, if that is the desire of the Dream Executioner."

Now this was a very fine answer, for every child believes that the Dream Executioner knows his innermost thoughts and dreams and is a harsh spirit, easily displeased. And that to speak overmuch of Him is therefore unwise.

But these were very tiny children whose curiosity and fecklessness are rightly notorious. Another child, a small girl with shining green eyes, said immediately:

"Teacher, why would the Dream Executioner want the Prince to die?"

Which was altogether a more troublesome thing to answer. But after a moment the Teacher, who was very old and wise and familiar with the minds of children, said:

"Child, it is not for us to question the desires of the Dream Executioner. Everything He does is mysterious, and terrible for poor mortal minds to consider. It is better to await His judgment quietly and then to accept it without question."

"But, Teacher," said yet another child — this one squirming in his eagerness to speak, "everyone says the Prince is a good man and brave and fair. Why does he have to be judged by the Dream Executioner at all?"

And this was the most troublesome question of all. (Indeed, it closely paralleled earnest and heated discussions then underway in a deep and sacred chamber within the castle — a fact of which the old man could scarcely have been aware, and yet which perhaps he sensed in some dark way, for he was long familiar with the workings of the world.)

The Teacher said: "Child, you have asked a thing that is not given to children to understand, nor to any mortal people who have not been chosen to sit on the High Council and decide such matters. But I will tell you it has happened many times in my life that men

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and women have brought upon themselves the judgment of the Dream Executioner. And those whom the Dream Executioner has taken have been guilty of monstrous blasphemies and sinful ambition."

"You mean," said the squirming child, "like the old wizard who dreamed of being able to fly?"

"That is right, child," said the Teacher. "And that is a story which you would all do well to remember when your dreams grow too wild — or your tongues, as they begin to do this morning."

Beneath his glare the children fell briefly silent, remembering old stories which in their imaginations were made fantastically new. The Teacher took a deep draught of damp air and held it for a few moments, wondering at the tinge of trepidation or alarm that had come to life at the bottom of his stomach. He was old enough to know not to make too much of imponderable emotions, nor to dismiss them.

And the sun rose higher in the empty sky.

The intention of its architects, slow centuries past, was that the chamber of the High Council should be the most awesome and intimidating room in all the castle-city of Quath. Toward that end the chamber had been carved out of monstrous blocks of snow-white stone and placed atop a commanding precipice overlooking the marshy plain. Tall columns along its sides supported a soaring roof some three stories overhead, with a gap as large as a tall man left between the roof and the top of the walls so that sunlit air could enter. The walls themselves were adorned with all manner of heraldic artifacts, detritus of ancient battles, banners, symbols and icons. Unfortunately the effect had been diluted somewhat over the last two hundred years as the growing castle had piled up around the council chamber in an amorphous fashion, finally leaving the grand meeting-room in the very shadow of such lesser locations as the athletes' dining chamber, the municipal arena of science and magic, and the apartments of the ceremonial chef and his sizable staff. Still, the place was impressive enough in its way.

When the Princess of Quath strode rapidly into the room without ceremony of any kind, she found the several members of the High Council in intense discussion among themselves and with two dozen young aristocrats of the sort that always congregates around any whiff of spilling blood or brandished power. These attentive young men were the first to notice the arrival of the Princess. Hurriedly they launched themselves into disorganized displays of obeisance or (in the case of those of a more progressive habit of thought) at least alarm. In short order the chamber had fallen into a general silence, though it was an unsteady si-

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lence that seemed bound together by a surreptitious web of murmurs.

"Is no one," said the Princess loudly, "prepared to invite me to be seated?"

Into the consequent stumble and confusion she strolled placidly, dragging behind her as if in afterthought the ceremonial adornments that hung from her otherwise plain brown dress. A sandy-haired woman of riveting loveliness, the Princess had disregarded age-ensconced custom (by which members of the ruling class abandoned their self-chosen names in favor of inherited titles) and retained her childhood name, Ixxta. She bypassed without a glance the gentleman who held out for her the uncomfortable chair at the foot of the table at which honored guests of the Council were accustomed to be seated. As if at random, she chose instead for herself a large and ornately carven old chair about midway along the table's length — displacing in so doing one of the more tottering Elders of the assemblage. Grandly she seated herself.

The High Council likewise dropped into place. Those young aristocrats who daringly remained at the periphery of the room, finding themselves frowned at by the huge man with black, heavy brows who sat at the head of the table, hastily departed. And the heavy door boomed shut with an air of finality.

"My lady..." the black-browed man began, in a stentorian rumble.

"Please, High Elder," said Ixxta — for the Councilman in question had *not* kept his name, "let us not blow empty breath at one another. I have come because of this outrageous turn the Council has taken. You have pronounced calumnies and worse against the Ruling Family. You have unlawfully jailed my husband the Prince without any ground whatsoever. And you have excited our citizens to a state of unreasoning frenzy. I am here to demand redress."

This speech appeared to leave the Council members generally discomfited. Portly men past middle years, for the most part, they shifted in their seats rearranging their robes and eying one another edgily.

At his distant end of the table the High Elder rose. He towered over the assemblage for several heartbeats before loosing his great resonant voice.

"Very well, my lady," he said. "We will eschew ceremony. I remind you that you are before the High Council of Quath and would therefore do well to curb your renowned temper. I remind you also that the fate of your husband might have been more speedily settled if you had heeded our call for your presence two days past. However. Since you have chosen at last to honor us with a visit...."

"Release my husband immediately!" Princess Ixxta exclaimed.

"No!" the High Elder replied harshly. "His crimes are too dark and numerous for such an easy solution."

"Crimes! Nonsense. He has com-

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mitted no crimes, unless it be a crime to desire to improve the lot of his people, to expand the bounds of mortal knowledge."

"My lady, need I recount for you the abominations against the ancient wisdom of our people which the Prince has — if not in fact caused — at least allowed to be carried out in the past few months?"

"I challenge you to name a single official act which deserves the name 'abomination.'"

"Very well." The High Elder stepped away from the table and began to take heavy paces around his chair. "There was the philosopher Spilcrove, whom the Prince pardoned outright after this Council had pronounced a sentence of death for heresy. There was the research project the Prince caused to be undertaken into — if I remember his words correctly — the underlying nature of living things. There was...."

"And where is the abomination in these things, High Elder? What is it you fear about the acquisition of truth?"

"Truth, my lady, is an ephemeral quality and does not inhere in the appearance of things, which is all that the Prince and his blasphemous cronies have proposed to examine. The dark spirits of the world have craftily woven misleading appearances into all things and all events, and without the prudent wisdom which experience alone...."

"Oh, poppycock!" the Princess exclaimed.

"My dear lady," a softer voice intervened. A gray-haired Elder across the table held Ixxta in his dolorous, but not unkind, gaze. She recognized this one: Blithro, the surgeon. "We are sympathetic to the Prince's ideals — and to your own."

Ixxta's flashing eyes discerned nods of agreement from several heads. *So,* she thought, the Council does not think as one, perhaps.

"However," the thin gray man continued, "we share the deep concern of the High Elder. It is so easy to become impetuous, when one is young. We have been tolerant of the Prince's — um — peculiar interests in the past. But his most recent project...."

"The absurd heresy," interjected the High Elder, "of mapping the heavens!"

"Quite. Well, my dear Princess, really — this has troubled us immensely. Many of us are old enough to remember, you know, the terrible fate that befell the astromancer Drimgen, who attempted something similar many years ago."

"I have read the histories," said Ixxta impatiently.

"He was driven mad and murdered all his colleagues," boomed the High Elder from the end of the room. "And finally died himself. A horrible, slow death. The just deserts of sacrilege!"

"That is ridiculous," said the Princess. "The poor man went crazy, yes.

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He did horrible things, yes, and suffered a terrible fate. But such things happen in life, sometimes — and often to brilliant individuals with their delicate temperaments. To attribute that poor man's death to his work, to his ambitions ... why, that is foolish. There is no connection whatever."

Blithro cleared his throat quietly, across the table, as he watched Ixxta like a bemused father. "Do you reject, then," he said slowly, "the possibility of spiritual intervention?"

Ixxta stared at him.

The members of the High Council stared at her.

"Spiritual intervention," she repeated dryly. "Elder, I do not intend to sit here and debate theology. But if you plan to invoke the old Dream Executioner bugaboo to justify your keeping my husband in chains, then, yes: I do reject the possibility of spiritual intervention."

"Then you do so, my lady," exclaimed the High Elder in a voice little short of a roar, "at your peril!"

"Oh, balderdash," said the Princess.

"My dear lady," said Blithro patiently, "as I have told you, there are many of us who are old enough to remember. Strange things that have happened in the past. For which, in my opinion, there is no other explanation."

"No other explanation," echoed the Princess with a note of measured scorn, "than the fabled Dream Executioner. Indeed."

But even as she spoke she cast her glance around the table and could not find her skepticism mirrored elsewhere. Well, she thought, perhaps they *do* think as one, after all. A coterie of superstitious old men.

"What is it that you want, then?" she inquired of the High Elder, who was still standing behind his chair.

"What we want, my lady, is quite simple. We want you to prevail upon the Prince, as we are sure you can, to abandon his present so-called research projects, to dismiss his advisors, and to publicly retract his recent statements on the advancement of knowledge."

Ixxta glared at the High Elder with fiery eyes. She rose to her feet, prompting a general shuffling of aged legs as the Council did likewise.

"To such an outrageous set of demands I can make only one response," the Princess began.

But the High Elder quieted her with a motion of his great flat hand. "Do not make it so readily," he warned. "The High Council is prepared to take firm action in this matter, Princess, in order to prevent darker forces from intervening to take it for us. *Firm* action, if you understand me. We have delayed our deliberations only to solicit your assistance in achieving a more acceptable solution. But if you spurn our entreaties summarily, I am afraid this matter can have only one outcome."

Ixxta felt a panicky understanding tearing through her. She looked quickly around the table, seeking any sort of veiled reassurance. The nearest thing

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she received — from Blithro and a few others — was a look of regretful helplessness.

"Take a few hours to think," the High Elder suggested. "Send for us, or for me alone, when you have made your decision. Believe me, Princess, we understand your dilemma. But we must act quickly, before a greater calamity befalls our people."

Ixxta held his gaze for several moments. She hoped her face did not betray her roiling emotions. Abruptly, she spun away from the table and approached the great doorway in a flurry of agitation. Reaching the door, she yanked it open with a fierce tug and was at the point of stalking out when a soft hand on her forearm stayed her. She spun her head to stare angrily into Blithro's compassionate gaze.

"Believe me, my dear lady," he said, fairly whispering. "We are not evil men. We do not wish your husband to have to die. But realize, Princess: our fear of the Dream Executioner is great. There are some of us who might be willing to take a chance — to risk the return of evil times — but there are others...." He glanced furtively across the great chamber. "I am afraid the consensus of opinion is clear. Think carefully, my lady."

He bowed low, and before he had straightened himself again, the Princess had flown from the room.

Ixxta's attendants, waiting outside the door, had difficulty keeping pace with their mistress as she ran through dark corridors and climbed great stairways toward the apartments of the Ruling Family. Only when she was safely home did she slow to a weary shuffle, allowing her personal attendant Chipa to overtake her.

"Can I help, my lady?" the faithful servant breathed.

Ixxta had paused before a high window facing south. She stood in the yellow-green sunlight like someone who has received an awful chill. Suddenly she faced Chipa and spoke in a quiet, purposeful voice:

"Do you remember the young chemist? The one who says he is mad for me — with the little beard? Find him quickly; have him come to my chamber. Hurry, Chipa — get him now!"

And she turned from her retreating attendant to face fully into the broad noonday sun.

"Follow her," rumbled the High Elder to a servant. "She will attempt something impetuous and foolish. Watch her carefully!"

The servant, a short man of ashen demeanor, nodded; a sly smile danced across his face. With a curt bow toward the High Elder, he padded swiftly down the long passageway.

Ghostlike, impenetrable, the silent fortress over Quath appears weaponless. One imagines that it fears no enemy in this isolate alley at the galactic

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rim, barely a glint against the void in the distant strategist's eye.

What manner of beings or powers or agglutinations of thought inhabit the fortress is not given us to understand. But events are pregnant with a meaning of their own. They force upon any strain of consciousness patterned sequences of recognition and response. Sometimes we may come to know the pattern invoked by events, though the patternmaker remains enigmatic, imponderable, utterly other.

The soggy planet on which the castle-city of Quath rides like a passenger rolls languidly through what may be the half-millionth revolution witnessed by the fortress. Nothing grossly distinguishes this turn from any other. Yet to the discerning (or merely anxious) observer, the place is astir with novel nuances — original, and yet evocative somehow of mysterious stirrings dimly remembered from the near or distant past.

The aura of infrared waste dims suddenly at the heatsink of the fortress. Power once dissipated is being turned to an intricate end, transmuted into something finer, more ethereal even than light. Clear as the untraveled Betweenness, pure as the thought of machines, quick and penetrating as a dream, some inchoate essence extrudes from the spiny struts of the fortress and passes in its unfathomable manner toward the planet below. Where, in the center of the castle-city that suffers the sultriness of another damp, yellow-green afternoon, the Prince Popohca lies in chains.

Beneath a feather-tree the old Teacher dozed. During the dinner hour, through which he habitually fasted, the day had grown hot and the air sluggish. And yet the sweat that formed lightly across his brow was a cold sweat, the sweat of a nameless chill that comes in the night, queerly out of place in the dappled shade of the feather-tree.

Presently the voices of children and the clack of wooden heels on stone caused the Teacher to stir. He awoke just as the first young faces appeared, heedlessly mirthful, returning for their afternoon instruction. Half a dozen children romped, incautiously close to where the old man propped himself up on bony elbows and regarded them in slowly dissipating puzzlement, blinking in the light that seemed suddenly to have sprung into being around him.

More children arrived. The Teacher lifted himself to his feet and stretched. Control of his thoughts had now largely returned to his rational, waking mind. Of his dream of frozen darkness and swift danger, nothing remained but a veiled sense of displacement and a few drops of sweat drying slowly in the sodden air.

The young chemist Danjuli had long known himself a prisoner to the capricious gaze, unpredictable will and petrifying beauty of the Princess Ixxta. Nonetheless her question had him

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dumfounded even as its echo hung in the still air of her private chamber. He swallowed, as if to determine that he retained some degree of control over his somatic processes, and stared for a moment at the amazingly complex patterns woven into the luxurious wall-hangings — perhaps thinking this encounter a kind of emotional maze whose convolutions might be mapped out there for the eye to study.

"Yes," said the Princess in an oddly soft, petulant voice, "or no?"

Danjuli blinked. "Well, yes, my lady. Yes. But...."

"Ah, very good. And would you be so kind, then, as to allow Chipa to fetch me a vial of this — um — substance, as quickly as possible? Within the hour, could we say?"

"But, my lady," the young chemist said, straightening on the divan. "It is an old formula. Not one of my own invention at all. I have merely read of it, in an old language. I have read of its effects, but never thought of actually ... borrowing it myself. For any reason." He felt dizzy and slightly out of breath.

"Of course you haven't, dear Danjuli." The Princess answered the chemist's erect posture by lowering the angle of her own reckless sprawl. "It isn't for tinkerers like you — should I say artists? — to find uses for their inventions. Or their discoveries. It is merely for you to make all possibilities manifest, that others might ponder their utility and merit. Chipa!"

Danjuli drew himself up straighter yet as the Princess's attendant entered the chamber with half-averted eyes.

"Go with Danjuli," Ixxta commanded. "Bring back a vial that he will give you." She turned again to her distraught guest. "You have my sincerest thanks, Danjuli."

The chemist rose uncertainly to his feet. He opened his mouth to mumble some formalistic rejoinder, but Ixxta went on after the briefest pause.

"And I will see to it," she said, as if shyly, "that you are doubly repaid for your kindness. And your discretion."

Danjuli bowed low. "Thank you, my lady," he muttered.

"Now hurry," said Ixxta. Her eyes were on the shadows that lengthened across the gray stones of the floor.

Bright drapery festooned the receiving chamber of the High Elder. Its blaring colors overwhelmed the muted fabrics in which he and his circle of attendants habitually dressed. The ashen-faced servant was admitted quickly to an inner chamber where the High Elder was waiting, seated majestically with no appearance of hurry or excitement.

While still inclined in a deep bow, the servant said: "My lord, she received within the hour the chemist Danjuli. With her personal slave Chipa this chemist repaired to his laboratory and there locked the door. Strange and evil odors were detected drifting forth through the fireshaft. There was no chatter within, however. The slave

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Chipa now returns to the Princess bearing no conspicuous container."

The servant raised his head. The barest hint of self-satisfaction stained the edges of his mouth.

A low cough or throat-clearing rumbled from the High Elder, whose head was bent toward the small, deeply inset window facing out onto a private court. He was disrobed to his undertunic in the afternoon heat. His jowls quivered almost imperceptibly — the only hint of what huge thoughts growled and sweated within the great cranium. After some indeterminate passage of time, he smiled strangely and turned to face the waiting servant, whose eyes had not left the Elder's side-turned head.

"Summon the Clerk of the Council," he instructed impassively. "And arrange for the chemist Danjuli to be arrested and prepared for interrogation. Make certain he is prepared thoroughly; I will interview him myself before the sun has set."

The High Elder did not acknowledge — perhaps did not even notice — his servant's parting bow. He stared at the ancient, fistulated wall before him as if peering at the naked future. The lowering sunlight threw long shadows across the crags and protuberances of his aged face.

"Esteemed Prince," the characters formed across the soft new parchment. Lord Blithro paused for a moment, glanced about the silent Tomb of Scrolls, then set his hand to scrabbling rapidly down the page.

"I take the unwarranted liberty of dispatching to you this missive only under pressure of grave and portentous events.

"Of the impending action of the High Council in your case I have nothing hopeful to say. Those of us who are inclined to sympathy toward you and your researches are sadly overpowered by certain forces which I need not describe too nicely. I am terribly sorry; but the world is what it is.

"I write firstly because I fear your wife, the virtuous Princess Ixxta, may be at this hour planning some bit of intrigue which can only result in a further deterioration of the plight of our beleagured City. For she has this afternoon — following an emotional interview with the High Council today — invited myself and the High Elder and several others to what she has chosen to call an Evening Refreshment in her apartments tonight. Prince, the manner of her invitation is nothing less than alarming! My own invitation arrived scrawled on the reverse, or Night, side of a large hand-colored astromantic fortune card. (In my case, the card denoted the disgraced Scholar.)

"What frightens me, Prince, is that your wife chooses to involve the High Elder in this mysterious affair. You know that he is no fool. Pompous, yes, and stubborn. Ignorant in many ways.

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And cruel! But keenly perceptive. If the Princess intends some dark mischief this evening, I am deeply afraid the High Elder will turn her plans against her.

"Perhaps, Prince, you can prevail upon her to behave with caution? The loss of both of you would leave our poor City at a wretched pass.

"Secondly, Prince: how can I say this? There have been dire forebodings during the past day or two — auguries of a ghastly spiritual awakening. Swamptrotters have ventured out in full daylight, and some of our most learned Elders report piercing symptoms of psychic stress.

"The name of the Dream Executioner was today invoked in High Council!

"I am not a superstitious man, Prince, but I have seen dark times sweep over the City in days past. I do not urge upon you any special action. And yet I am at a loss to conceive a graceful or painless remedy. So much is at stake. Think deeply on these matters, Prince, I implore you.

"If the fates should conspire to prevent our ever meeting again, Prince, I leave you with my deepest respect and admiration."

Blithro dared not read what he had written. He rolled and sealed the manuscript and commended it to a trusted messenger, urging haste and discretion. Then he retired to the innermost penetralia of the Tomb of Scrolls, where he turned his thoughts inward, to the darkest and quietest part of his mind. And he searched desperately for clues and divinations far removed from the brightness and ruction of the castle without, and oblivious to passing time.

Chipa trembled.

"Once more," said the Princess monotonously, as if she were discussing a routine matter of household affairs, "You will serve mulled wine in the ceremonial mugs marked with astromantic figures."

"Yes, my lady."

"Please don't say 'yes, my lady' until I'm finished. Now, my mug will be the one painted with ILLANDRA, the Sorceress. It will contain not wine but tea, do you understand?"

Chipa bit off her reflexive reply.

"Very well. The High Elder will be given the mug painted with NADOR, the Executioner. It will be filled first with wine, then with the contents of Danjuli's vial. Empty the entire vial —"

Chipa made a birdlike sound in her throat.

"The *entire vial*, Chipa. Into the mug. Stir it thoroughly. Put a dash of angelspice on top to be sure there is no untoward odor." She paused, studied her feet momentarily. "And Blithro will be given wine fortified with spirit of dragonflower. Again, top it with angelspice. And his mug will be INBOTE, the disgraced Sage. For the oth-

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ers, it doesn't matter. Just be *certain* to serve the principal mugs in their proper order."

Ixxta turned and stepped quietly to where her servant stood, face floorward and still trembling. "There, darling," she said, embracing Chipa by her slender shoulders, "I know how you hate this. But don't let yourself feel any responsibility. You are only doing my will." She paused.

And then, stepping away: "I am going to visit the Prince now, Chipa. I shall try to be back before the Refreshment begins. But in any case, I count upon you to have everything prepared by the time the guests arrive. It's getting late, Chipa — we *must* be ready!"

Shadows of children in the courtyard seem more real than their physical analogues, who have all but disappeared in the swirling fog of their mingled daydreams. Images of snacks and games, naughty tricks and stooping mothers occlude the evanescent shafts of clarity streaming from the old man in their midst. From the steamy haze, thoughts or fears coalesce periodically into spoken words:

"Teacher, tell us more of the Dream Executioner."

Glaring red and yellow effulgences of delicious fright! Children love ghost stories, the old man thinks. His mind is graven gray and cold, like stone. He replies, or merely considers:

"Children, the Dream Executioner comes to us out of a vast mystery as old and deep as the sea. He enters the special world we create out of our most secret thoughts and feelings and desires. He passes strangely into our dreams, where He works His gruesome will. There is no way to be safe from Him, wherever we are, nor can we ever know of His coming except in dreams so terrible that our minds will go mad rather than remember."

Shivering blue fear smelling of ozone pervades the ether. Mists of childish inattention burn away in the dry light of dread.

"Teacher, is the Dream Executioner very wicked?"

"No one knows that, child. Horrid things are said of Him, and horrid deeds mark His passage among us. Yet some say it is for the greater good that these things come to pass. Some believe He comes to purge us of that which is sinful, to remove from our society those who would transgress the decreed limits of mortal aspiration. Others argue that the Dream Executioner is like a jailer, that He is a guard who stands between mortalkind and its highest dreams and desires."

A new fog rises, waxy and purple: confusion. But it is cleft like a soft, chalky rock:

"Teacher, what does the Dream Executioner look like?"

The old man's brittle thoughts press against some bastion they cannot pass. His mind strobes white in alarm. Along some impermissible timepath he raises a bony finger slightly over the

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heads of his innocent charges and says:

"But there He is, child. There — just behind you!"

And one by one the children turn. Preternatural caution informs their movements. A pall of forgetfulness drops across their faces as minds are swept clean, desolate of the playful things of childhood. Nameless dread inhabits them now, filling them all. As they stare helpless.

For a moment, black tendrils of revulsion seem to grow from the base of each tiny skull. Little cankers form like unpleasant memories (but vaguely, as if uncertain what they signify). There is a fugitive whiff of putrescence.

It lasts a moment only. What parching horror had seized the afternoon now dissipates like an unfinished dream. Time turns aright. The children have beheld nothing; they have nothing to forget.

And the Dream Executioner turns away. To move slowly toward the castle.

From the surrounding stonework seeps a millennial accumulation of pleasure and regret. Tides of mortality surge madly and recede; memories stir with a rustle of dry whispers. Living dreams and dead are here equally ghostlike, likewise doomed and futile, but limned with lugubrious beauty nonetheless. Their cacophony increases with the passing of a door. The crucial phase is entered.

Here the Dream Executioner must halt. (To feel again the aching bliss or mortality! To drink the blood of sorrow like wine, wallow in an orgasmic stew of secrets and surprises! Around him a million irrationalities dance: moods, feelings, eerie notions, vain expectations in a synesthetic ballet. Dreams, everywhere!

Some time passes this way.) Along the broad corridor, indistinct figures progress at an afternoon gait. In this odd realm they seem no more than eddies, fluid events — purposive globules moving through the viscous, emotive humor.

Concentrate: there is a form to this madness, a pattern, a way to the center.

Tapping unfathomable energies, the Dream Executioner sharpens and clarifies his embodiment. He becomes more like this quarry, more manlike. There is a danger in this, and an advantage. Less ethereal and more *present*, he drifts closer to the threshold of mortal awareness. But in so doing, his perceptions of the castle-city become more distinct, more solidly anchored in the actual moment and less fraught with inchoate evocations.

He begins to move swiftly through this new physical realm, all the while attenuating himself further to the situation here. At certain moments, certain junctures in the strange matrix of his being, he can mistake himself for an actual bodily entity. A guard, across whose portal the Dream Executioner seems to pass, senses drowsily his progress. There is even, for the Dream

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Executioner, a sensation of *body*, of containment within these corridors. His awareness has become so localized he seems flickeringly to perceive the greasy smoke of torches spaced along the wall and to depend on their illumination.

Now the Dream Executioner pauses, sensing nearby a sensibility that stabs through the darkness like a beacon. He considers this. The dense pulses of thought, variable in strength and direction, distinctly emanate from this temporal plane; they are too piercing to have echoed out of the past or leaked from the future. Diverting more of his attentive resources, the Dream Executioner senses — a mere thickness of stone away — a compact, trancelike envelope of concentration wrapped purposefully around an aging mortal. The envelope seems to bend, to refocus in response to the Dream Executioner's probing, and suddenly —

Now! Straight into the very being of the Dream Executioner a frail, gray man stares, horrified. The undiluted image he beholds sears the flesh of his brain. Quickly the Dream Executioner extricates himself, but he senses the pain and damage that has been wrought. The mortal's striken image dims in the darkness.

The Dream Executioner moves again. The destination is very close, now. He approaches it with immaterial swiftness.

A brightly lit chamber, windowless and spartanly appointed, comes to contain his awareness. It is understood immediately that these are trusted young officers; they have been detailed as jailers and have little taste for the task, which, however, they perform diligently. Crisp, forthright and orderly, their thoughts are animated by ambition and quiet cunning. They are playing at cards.

As if through a dense barrier, their minds stir uneasily as the Dream Executiner passes. Placing two cards upon the table, one of them glances warily about; the other works idly at the cord on his sword hilt while considering his bet. Deep in the minds of the two men a shadow has fallen, rendering them tense and restive. The first shudders slightly and seems ready to remark at the chill, but now his attention is seized by the money his companion lays down. Their uneasiness is momentarily forgotten. The Dream Executioner moves on.

His object is near — just beyond this wall. The soul of the prisoner throbs, pent in its chained body, yearning to escape, to triumph, to soar to the heavens!

The Dream Executioner breathes deeply of this. Stone, wood, smoky light become blurred and indefinite around him. Objects and events squirm with possibility; actuality branches from this nexus into innumerable avenues; the ether is a storm of colors visible and invisible. An inner chamber is entered. A climactic dream is begun.

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Here lies the Prince — or rather, languishes upright. He is a man of middle height, darkly colored and coarsely formed in face and muscle. Backed and fastened to a thick columnar post, the sturdy young Lord Popohca inhabits (in the physical world of stones and flowers) a murky, unsunlit cubicle, badly ventilated by peeping-chinks along its fronting wall. In the world of dreams his realm is much vaster: a many-peopled expanse of blue and green, lovely and broad, but pocked also with bogs and peat-groughs where thick-furred creatures dart and pause to bare fangs dripping bile.

This is the dream of the Prince: one of its shifting facets. This is the dream that must be adjusted, or destroyed.

The Dream Executioner now appears to Popohca. He oozes corruptly into the young man's mind, dissolving its familiar artifacts. The Prince knows the alien presence in his dream and neither resists nor acquiesces in it. He yields no commitment to its reality; his dream becomes more obscure.

The Dream Executioner causes dreadful words — too dangerous to be a part of any mortal language — to be born in the Prince's mind. These words concatenate to become an instruction, a threat, a cajoling, a vomitous insult. Popohca experiences these meanings with a blanching, a shudder, a look of sickened understanding. But the quality of his dream is unchanged. Its visible aspects multiply and precess ineffably.

The Dream Executioner works subtle changes in the Prince's self-knowledge. He causes the Prince to believe himself dead; resurrected; transmogrified to an insect, a cobweb, a particular time of night, an amorphous curve in a sixty-three-dimensional space, the smell of rainwater drenching dead leaves; then himself again, but in an inverted world where evil is highly regarded and pain is coveted. To each advent in this protean progression the Prince thinks, with placid stolidity: "Hallucination." Or, again: "Nightmare."

The Dream Executioner now orchestrates for the Prince a vivid and compelling dream. Over a period of several months he is tried by the High Council, convicted, and sentenced to die; the Princess makes an emotional plea for clemency; he is conditionally pardoned and given leave to continue his researches; his projects advance slowly; obstacles are gradually surmounted; the final breakthrough is at hand; his colleagues are jubilant; the momentous experiment is conducted; all ends in failure; the grand hypotheses are confuted; colleagues take their own lives; the Princess falls ill and perishes; the Prince weeps inconsolably. To all of which the Prince, from the pit of his being, rages:

"No!"

And somehow his dream is intact. Its passion, color, and chiaroscuro become more profound.

The Dream Executioner pauses be-

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fore what seems the unsappable vitality and resilience of this mortal's dream. It will be problematic to disarm this dream while the heart of Popohca still beats. To this problem the Dream Executioner applies his unknowable mentation.

But his pondering is abruptly interrupted. A profound stirring has infected the heart of the Prince. The Dream Executioner disentangles his awareness from the Prince's dream, to search among outer phenomena for the cause of this disturbance.

And perceives another mortal — a female! Princess Ixxta, it is understood at once.

What a surge of emotion cascades through the ether! A thunderous sympathy entwines these mortals, a deeply resonant pathos. The Prince rejoices to escape his recent bizarre nightmare; recollection is washed from his mind by a frenetic new sequence of thought. The man and woman embrace. Which of their tumultuous feelings finds expression in spoken words is difficult for the incorporeal observer to deduce.

The Dream Executioner considers this couple as if it were a sculpted intaglio, an enigmatic latticework. He turns it about in his alien mind, noting its interesting features. There is a striking asymmetry in the union of these creatures — a mind sensitive to aesthetic considerations might find the imbalance pleasing. In the man Popohca there is a great steadfastness, a reservoir of strength and calmness that abides like a great gray rock, immutable under even extraordinary pressure. But from this woman —! The Dream Executioner perceives a rapid efflux of transient ideas. It is like a brilliant clacking that steadily permutes in arrangement and coloration, like an undammable and energetic fount. In some fashion, these two odd halves are fused into a peculiarly self-enhancing, organic whole.

It comes to the Dream Executioner that he may have underevaluated the nature and cause of the present situation. For of this pair of beings, he has heretofore given his attention only to the man Popohca.

It further comes to the Dream Executioner that between these mortals it is the woman Ixxta that troubles him more. And in coming to know this, the Dream Executioner knows also the solution to the problem that has briefly given halt to his intentions.

The Prince and Princess are locked in a desperate embrace at the moment the Dream Executioner seizes the chain of events and gives it a great, cathartic twist. (Outside the castle-city of Quath, the dim minds of swamptrotters become puzzled and then wild with fear, as the steadfast infrared beacon, their lodestar for innumerable generations, goes dark.) And time is split like a gem: neatly scissile.

Into the unreal opening steps a huge man clad as a bandit. Great furs and leathers hang, unlaundered, from his frame. His hair is oily and falls in

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matted gathers. His skin reeks of sweat, foul humors, rotting residues and blood of recent prey. His eyes are yellow, his teeth tainted green, and his face a pox-ridden red, with scales that bulge like lichen. Spittle flecks his beard. He exhales a swampy fume.

Ixxta turns slowly to regard him, paces away in the cramped cell. Her eyes widen in sick horror. Even before his great hands, slippery with unhuman slime, seize her and yank her from her Prince, she has begun to scream.

Popohca bellows with unholy eloquence, tearing at his chains.

With an awesome calmness, as though drifting through the motions of some diabolic ballet, the huge stinking creature propels the Princess across the dark cell, until she is pressed tightly to its far wall. Ixxta shrieks mindlessly, crazed with dread and disgust.

The Dream Executioner is careful in positioning his bodily creation, anxious that Popohca should have an unobstructed view of what will follow. His monster grunts with pleasure; it tugs meaningfully at its filthy clothing.

The look of dazed comprehension that crosses the face of the Prince coalesces quickly into a mask of unalloyed madness. He writhes and rages futilely against his bonds.

Ixxta's face is unnaturally white. She screams without pause or thought as the hideous beast comes near, trailing discarded fabrics. The unearthly stench, the raw and pulpy touch, all are blurred into a single sensation which her mind refuses to experience; she seeks the absolution of unconsciousness. But the Dream Executioner holds her awareness like a plaything.

Long before the loathsome dance is through, the Dream Executioner knows he has succeeded. He brings the sundered chunks of time back together with a final deafening slam.

The sun had just fallen behind the outer walls of the castle-city of Quath when the hour of the Princess's Evening Refreshment arrived and the invited guests filled the Royal apartment. The sky threw a pretty pattern of yellow and purple on the high-rising walls in the east. In this display some of those gathered affected to take an interest as they waited chafingly for their hostess to arrive.

The High Elder, clutching a mat of paper in one great hand while clenching and unclenching the other, was mightily annoyed to have the timing of his great stroke of power thus disrupted. But he said nothing. The news of Lord Blithro's sudden and fatal apoplexy had just been received, and he supposed this had something to do with the lateness of the Princess.

Suddenly Princess Ixxta hurried through the chamber. Her face was flushed as if by some great upset. Her eyes were dark and distant. Behind her trailed the servant Chipa, bearing a large tray full of decorative mugs.

As always, the piercing loveliness

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of the Princess was remarkable to behold. Yet tonight her beauty was, if anything, more delicately perfect, more irresistibly poignant than usual. An extraordinary tenderness, perhaps born of ineffable sorrow, seemed to tremble just below the surface of her luminous skin. Few who saw her could not have felt some deep responsive stirring of the heart.

Ixxta moved lightly through the room, seemingly insensible of the gestures of admiration on all sides, until she stood immediately before the High Elder, who bowed slowly and then righted himself as if prepared to deliver some statement or speech. But whatever words he might have intended were delayed by the arrival of the servant Chipa, bearing her tray of beverages. The smell of mulled wine and angelspice wafted through the air, provoking murmurs of anticipation from the lower end of the room. The tray was brought to the fore just in front of the Princess and her honored guest.

Chipa struggled to balance her load with a single hand, so that she might serve mugs from the tray with the other.

The High Elder made a distracted motion — an offer of assistance, perhaps, or simply an impatient grab.

At that moment, with a movement of consummate delicacy, Princess Ixxta extended a bare, bejeweled arm and plucked a particular mug from the tray. She drew it rapidly to her lips and drank the better part of its contents at a single draught. Then she lowered it slightly and stared into the eyes of the High Elder, who stared back with a somewhat fuddled air. The mug chosen by the Princess was strikingly painted with the iamge of NADOR, the astromantic figure denoting The Executioner, or likewise Death.

Chipa the attendant fell then to screaming and dropped her burden onto the delicately woven carpet. She clutched madly at the Princess, though several of those gathered attempted to pull her away, and continued to cling to her mistress long after Ixxta had fallen gasping to the floor.

At the direction of the High Elder, the Prince was not informed of his wife's suicide until sometime after he had delivered his signed confession and recantation to the assembled Council. Despite the damning evidence contained in this confession (especially when taken together with certain other documents which fell concurrently into the Council's possession), the Prince was pardoned and allowed to resume his ruling position, which he occupied unremarkably for another thirty-five years.

A lesser functionary in a greater government, reviewing innumerable reports in a stronghold incomprehensibly far away, made a passing note that the world containing the castle-city of Quath need not be accounted when formulating strategy in that isolate alley of the galactic rim for, oh, another century or so.

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This superior story, which begins as a medical thriller and turns into Something Else entirely, comes from a young (29) writer who lives in California with his wife and four children and says he is probably the only writer of SF to emerge from Hopkins, MN., the Raspberry capital of the world. His stories have appeared in ORBIT and NEW DIMENSIONS, and a novel, I AM NOT THE OTHER HOUDINI, was published in 1978 by Harpers.

The Night Stair

BY

MIKE CONNER

...but may, if it takes, be of mighty use to man's health for the mending of bad blood by borrowing from a better body....

—Samuel Pepys, after witnessing one of the first blood transfusions ever performed.

The day-care center was the bottom floor of a grand, last-century Portland Avenue duplex, and I had my camera and my lights set up in front of the huge granite fireplace. All I needed now were the kids, so I went back to find the center's director, Joanne Thompson, out in the play yard. The first adult I saw was a tall young woman who watched the proceedings from the porch rail. Kids were slogging through a thick layer of vermiculite that covered the whole yard; aides stood by to make sure no one ran too fast, for good reason: it looked like about half the class were bleeders. Their kind of measured, deliberate play brought back too many memories. I decided to try and get the photo session over with as quickly as I could.

"Excuse me," I said to the woman, "could you tell me where Joanne Thompson is?"

"I'm Joanne." She had beautiful brown eyes, large and still and deep. It was a moment before I picked up my part of the conversation.

"I'm Burt Nordstrum."

"Oh." She smiled. "The photographer. Sorry I couldn't show you in."

I was standing there trying to reconcile her fine Irish-type features with her profession, because she just did not look like your average creche-momma. Joanne Thompson had the stature and the figure of a fashion model, and even made the smock and jeans she was

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wearing look elegant. Apparently, I was gaping at her, because she folded her arms and smirked back. "You did bring your camera, didn't you?"

"Ah — right. Ready for the group shot first."

She lifted her hands, clapped loudly, and the playing stopped, just like that. "Children, this is Mr. Nordstrum. He'll be taking your picture in the big room. Let's all *walk*." And they followed her orders to the letter. Not that they filed into the house in a military column, but for preschoolers, the discipline was amazing. Joanne's aides spaced themselves, gently moving the group along while we took up the rear.

"Where'd you learn that trick?" I asked. This time I noticed that none of the hallway doors had knobs — and that the heavy oak stairway balusters were covered with laced-on pads.

"The children know how to be careful. And what the consequences are if they're not."

I saw what she meant when I got behind the camera for the first shot. There were kids in the front with hockey helmets on, and twin girls with knees tightly wrapped in elastic bandages, their bare arms clouded with the same kind of bruises I had all over my own body. One of the bigger boys had both puffy eyes rimmed in shiny red blood. I wanted to get the hell out of there. Instead I looked at Joanne Thompson. "How do you want this? I can close on the faces."

"No. Get it all first. That'll be for me. Then we'll do a little unwrapping for the parents." She shot me a queer look, but I knew what she was talking about. God, how I knew.

I finished the last of the individual shots before noon, just as some of the moms and dads were coming to collect their kids. Joanne was in the office off the kitchen. Above her desk was a hand-painted sign:

We run a School
Not a Hospital
Teach Care

"All done," I said. "I should get the prints back the first of next week. I'll give you a call when I finish stuffing the envelopes."

"Good," she said, barely glancing at me. I noticed a sheet of paper in the typewriter with a New York City address typed at the top of the page.

"By the way, how did you get my name? I don't usually handle school portraits." *But I can really use the work.* She smiled, friendly once again.

"Mutual acquaintance. I was told you were very special."

"Oh, yeah? Who had the kind words?"

"See you in a few days, Burt," she replied, in the same tone she used on the kids, and who was I to argue? I packed my stuff away and left, doing just what I was told.

I lived in the oldest part of Milltown, at the point of a triangle bordered on the long side by the river, with my

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street and Cedar Avenue forming the other angles. In the old days there had been a neighborhood called Westbank here, with wooden rowhouses stacked from Cedar to the water. But in the midsixties, most of it had been razed in the redevelopment craze, replaced by parking lots for the U across the river and a couple of prestressed towers for the students. I lived in the shadow of these giants, in a carriage house that had once housed the St. Anthony Fire Brigade, a trendy and nostalgic red-brick building that suited a photographer's ego. There were arched windows two yards high, double wooden doors in the front big enough for a steam pumper and a team of steaming horses. The first floor, where the stables used to be, was empty — I had plans for making it a gallery someday; a beautifully curlicued wrought-iron spiral staircase went to the loft where I slept and worked. And of course there was the original brass pole. I kept my car parked right underneath the hole.

After I lugged up my equipment, I went right to work on the portrait negs, making good progress until I pulled the strip out of the rinse and happened to see a shot of the twins, who'd insisted on sitting together, bandaged legs pressed close. They were smiling happily, but I wondered how long it would take before their bleeding got to them, before the pain of joints locked tight with blood that refused to clot turned those smiles into masks. Soon even the mask might dissolve, once they realized that only the rich could afford to buy the concentrated blood factors, the cryoprecipitates and fresh frozen plasma essential for surviving in a world that was slowly bleeding to death. *Aw, but they're kids,* I thought. They had a right not to know. But I tried not to look at any more faces until I was through with business.

Then I started on what I considered my real work: my images, my key to independence from my wealthy father. I had a contact sheet of a roll I'd shot at dusk the evening before at a place along the river called the Night Stair. It was a part of Westbank history the planners hadn't eradicated, probably more out of ignorance than mercy. Tucked into a fold along the limestone river cliffs, the Night Stair had originally been a set of wooden steps leading down to a ferry landing. Later, a real stairway was poured from concrete and provided with a pipe rail that was overgrown in spring by wild lilac and bleeding heart and sumac. At the top of the stairway is an old iron gazebo that shelters a handpump. The best water in the city comes out of that pump; people drive miles to fill bottles from it; in fact, old-timers claim the waters have curative properties. Anyway, the stairway itself got its name in the early century, when the old ferry landing became a quay for the University Rowing Club, whose crew team occasionally provided favored ladies with free tours up the

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Night Stair on warm spring evenings.

I'd been shooting time-exposures from the base of the Night Stair with a full moon giving me strong, mysterious backlight that turned the lilac clusters into puffs of ectoplasmic candy. The air had been absolutely still, each step gleaming like a tombstone up to the canopied water well. Three of the shots looked promising; I snipped out the best negative, put it into the enlarger, and burned a few prints, which I got all the way to the fix before the phone rang. I dried my hands and answered it.

"Nordstrum. Afternoon."

"Hello, dear." The voice was hesitant.

"Mom! What's up? How are you?"

"I'm fine, Burt. What about you? You haven't had any ... trouble?"

I frowned. Ever since I'd been diagnosed a bleeder when I was seven, I'd dreaded telling her about episodes. "I'm in good shape, Ma. I would have called." I waited a moment before asking the obligatory question. "How's Father?" She knew what bad blood existed between Father and me, but the illusion of concern reassured her and she sounded more cheerful.

"Well, that's what I'm calling about. He wants to see you."

"Really. When's he coming over?"

"You know he won't go where you live. Please, he's asked me to...."

"Use your influence to bring me over the river." I could almost hear the great Franklin Nordstrum saying it, and I wondered what he'd do if I refused to come. There was no way he could force me — and the only thing I wanted from him was the one thing I knew he'd never do for me — to have his Dr. Claigborn remove the pumps and filters and valves he put into my body ten years ago.

Still, I was curious about what he wanted. And after all, I hadn't seen Mother in her own home for too long.

"All right," I said, surprising her. "When?"

"If you're not too busy with your work, lunch tomorrow."

"Wednesday happens to be the one day I've got lunch free," I lied. "I'll present myself promptly at noon. At the back door, of course."

Mother's voice caught, and I felt sorry I'd said it. None of this was her fault, after all. Her only fault had been marrying Franklin, and that was something she saw differently than I did. "Thank you, Burt," she said, ringing off.

I held onto the phone a moment before going back to my prints. When they were rinsed, I turned on the lights for a look. All three were beautiful, with the gazebo stark against the glowing city-lights beyond the dark, scalloped trees. Then I swore, because all three were spoiled by a thumb-sized smudge near where the Night Stair ended. I checked the negatives, but it wasn't a flaw in the emulsion; in fact, of the four Night Stair shots on the contact sheet, two showed the same

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smudge in the same general position. Maybe static had spoiled the film when I rewound the roll. Whatever the cause, it was damned annoying, and the smudge was in too critical a position to burn away on the enlarger. I'd have to do the sequence again.

Carelessly I tossed the prints onto the drying rack, then gathered the school negs to take to the lab at Southtown. That made me remember Joanne Thompson, which improved my mood a little. My right leg was throbbing from all the time I'd spent on my feet. I had a hemarthritic knee because of frequent bleeds in that joint, and though it didn't feel like it was bleeding now, I didn't want to take any chances. I rolled up my pants, sat on the bed, and rewrapped the bandage as tightly as I could stand — just like the two smiling twins at Joanne's creche.

Bad luck and I were old friends, after all.

Blood is a miraculous tissue, a suspension of the three types of cells you learn about in biology, proteins called factors that are synthesized in the liver and other organs, and a solvent — plasma — that flows in perfect osmotic balance with cellular components of the body. Blood is the transport that brings food and air to brain and heart and skin. And when the body injures itself, when the vessel is punctured, blood fixes the leak itself.

One moment, it's fluid, flowing at pressure through the tiniest capillaries; then, come injury to the vessel wall or surrounding tissues, a cascading sequence of biochemical reactions begins. The vessel wall contracts. Then sticky platelets, attracted to the colagen in the walls of the damaged cells, plaster themselves to the hole. And while this is going on, the protein factors in the plasma initiate the reactions that transform an ambient, dissolved protein — fibrin — into insoluble strands of fibrinogen whose netlike tangles patch the wound and prevent further blood loss, and then, amazingly, contract to bring the damaged cells together to heal. Once that process is underway, fibrinolytic proteins dissolve the clot, preventing it from coming loose and doing damage to the lungs or heart or brain.

It's a staggeringly complex sequence of chemical transformations, and what's even more incredible is that all these proteins and ionized minerals remain inactive until needed and even then remain localized. If they didn't, all your blood would clot if you cut your finger. Normal people don't have to worry about it, because their blood behaves the way it ought to every time, all their lives. If you're normal, you never wonder if factor III will wake up factor VII. It just happens. Ignorance is bliss.

It's a bliss we bleeders can't know. You've heard of the poem that goes, "for want of a nail, the shoe was lost, for want of a shoe, the horse was lost,"

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and on and on? Well, my lost nail is called factor VIII, a protein known as anti-hemophilic globulin, or AHG. Without it, prothrombin won't change to thrombin, thrombin won't be there to react with fibrin, and the result is no clot. An injured bleeder just keeps bleeding. The rest of the mechanism remains intact except for that one nail, and if you infuse factor VIII into the bloodstream, either in concentrated form, or as part of plasma or whole blood, the blood will clot normally.

Once, hemophilia had been a medical curiosity, something studied in Genetics I. Queen Victoria and her bleeder-sons sapping the vitality of every royal house in Europe. A tragic story, true, but not a major public-health problem — until the spontaneous mutations began. To this day, scientists have not been able to agree about the cause, but the effects almost overnight became devastatingly apparent. Suddenly normal people of all ages, and both sexes, lost the ability to synthesize factor VIII. Hemophilia became a worldwide epidemic, and the consequences of a simple bruise to the arm, or even of biting one's own tongue suddenly turned disastrous. Because, although the management of the disease was in general well-refined, there developed a severe shortage of the necessary blood products. The laws of supply and demand swung with the same inexorable momentum as the chemical reaction of factors in the blood. Blood, literally, became worth its weight in gold. And those with the gold got the blood.

My parents discovered that their son was a bleeder after a winter accident on an icy pavement, when my feet went out from under me and I gashed my chin to the jawbone. I bled through my bandages for three days until my poor mother worked up the nerve to tell Franklin that his own son was a victim of the disease he'd been editorializing against in his newspaper. "No Welfare for Bleeders — until the magnitude of the problem" (he always referred to Bleeding as a 'problem'), "could be properly assayed." He actually believed that only the sports and misfits of the world were being affected.

I guess the day he took me to the University Medical Center was the day I became a misfit and a sport too. Losing my factor VIII was bad luck enough. Having a rich father was worse.

It was a beautiful late-April day, everything finally coming alive, the bare branches now dusted everywhere with green. With the air so warm and fragrant, I decided to ride my bike to the lunch meeting with Franklin. Certainly, the pleasure of cycling to the Other Side was part of the reason I put on my helmet and pads, but I was also thinking of a way to get through Franklin's thick hide. I didn't flatter myself thinking he cared, one way or the other, if I hurt myself now. But it was a reminder. In the old days, before Doc Claiborne had done his work on me, nothing would

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have made Father go through the roof faster than to see me weaving along the street on a bicycle.

There was a room in his house I called the Rubber Room. Literally, that's what it was, floor, walls *and* ceiling faced with ten or fifteen centimeters of foam. If he caught me so much as running along a hallway, or coming down the stairs two at a time, or leaving the house without checking first with him or Mother, into the Rubber Room I went. "Where you can't hurt yourself!" he'd thunder. I'd proved him wrong once, though, by ripping the padding from a spot on the wall and banging myself half silly. They'd had to drill into my skull to relieve the pressure caused by subdural bleeding that time.

So I rode across the river on the 52nd Street Bridge, then turned onto Franklin Parkway. There were plenty of other bikers out, and a few were bleeders too, my comrades. They got a special nod from me.

Eventually, the homes got larger, the lawns and hedges more ostentatious. There was no mistaking Franklin's manse, however, because on his lot the ivy-covered, Midwestern solidity gave way to neo-Moorish. Arabesque, he called it: minarets in the front, three gilded domes behind, everything camel sandstone, elaborately carved and sealed against the elements. I told him once the place looked like Citizen Kane's outhouse, and it's true — Franklin Nordstrum is a half-pint Kane, with his one newspaper and his local power. Arabesque is a mansion, all right, but it's on the same street with a lot of others.

I rang the gate bell and identified myself to the squawkbox. The dervish-patterned barrier parted. I was in my father's domain again.

Mother was Shaherazad in a designer-print frock. She had a wide face and pale, disky eyes, and she relaxed a little when I kissed her.

"I'm glad you've come, Burt."

"Yeah, well, it's gorgeous out, isn't it?" I saw her look at the bike, then at me, checking for damage. "Hey, I made it in one piece, don't worry. I ride just about every day. It's good for the legs."

"Well, I do worry."

I took her shoulders. "Look. Didn't I promise I'd come to you if anything was wrong? I don't want my problems with Father interfering with the respect and consideration I owe you. Okay?"

She smiled without opening her mouth, pressing her forehead gently against my chest.

"*Drew.*" Franklin's big voice boomed from the mezzanine above the atrium garden. "Have the boys remove that contraption from the foyer." He pronounced it *foy-yay*. I let go of Mom and looked up at him. He had his pipe in one hand and was dressed impeccably in gray linen, with a perfectly folded silk rising from the breast pocket. His hair was more gray now than red, and the thick mustache had gone almost completely white, but the jutting jaw-

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line and steely eyes were undiminished. He was the Thin Gray Duke, Citizen Nordstrum.

Mother took the bike away herself, leaving me alone near the little garden with him staring down from on high.

"Good morning, sir," I said, waiting for him to come down. He didn't.

"We'll take our lunch in the study, Burton."

Burton. I'd come along about the same time Father decided to build Arabesque. My namesake was Sir Richard Burton, the African explorer, rival to Stanley, and translator of the *Arabian Nights*. I went up the stairs two at a time. We did not shake hands.

"You're looking fit," he said.

Ten years gone from this house, and that's all he could say. The man loathed me; he tried to beat me down with his loathing, but the son he'd raised was too dispassionate to succumb very easily. Franklin broke off his gaze suddenly, brushing his mustache with the tips of his fingers before opening the door to the study for me. His study: the one place I had always been absolutely forbidden to enter wasn't so mysterious after all. There were shelves of leather-bound books, a huge globe on a rosewood stand, an astrolabe on a table in front of the window screen. Positively Medieval. The table was set for two.

"Mom won't be joining us?"

"She has a luncheon with her Variety Club. Sit down."

I did sit. After all these years, he was still used to giving me orders, and I was still used to taking them. One of the servants — Franklin employed Filipino "boys" exclusively — brought in a liver pate and a Waldorf salad with plenty of raisins and bits of date. Rich in iron. He'd always imagined he might cure me by pumping me full of iron. I was hungry enough not to make an issue out of it and started to eat with him watching me. Finally I put down my fork.

"Mother said you wanted to talk to me about something."

"That's correct." He signaled the servant to take away his untouched salad. I kept mine. A cart was wheeled in, and the Filipino served a spinach souffle, also rich in iron.

I remembered the last time Father had wanted to talk to me. Then it had been in Claigborne's office suite downtown, right after I'd got out of the Bleeding Unit at the University Hospital. Totaling the car I'd been given for my 17th birthday had put me there for a three-week stay, and Franklin had been calm and concise. "Burton," he'd announced, "you are going to be made responsible for your own actions. Your complete disregard for your health and safety is due, in great part, to the resources I provide. I can afford to have you treated, but this episode is your last. You see, I can also afford to pay Dr. Claigborne to alter you surgically so that, in future, should you need blood, you'll have the means to attain it yourself."

At the time, I'd figured he means a reserve account in my name with Claig-

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borne. Even when the Doc began to describe the surgical procedure and the devices he intended to implant near my thorax and behind my stomach, I still didn't get it. The realization came after the operation which had cost Father three-quarters of a million dollars and left his son physiologically capable of an act of vampirism.

Now Franklin Nordstrum pushed a newspaper — his newspaper — across the table toward me. It was folded in half to the only story on the bottom of page four:

PROGRESS PARK SLAYING

The partially-decomposed body of an unidentified woman was discovered late yesterday near the Progress Park Recreation Center.

Police spokesman Hector Chiemsik stated that preliminary findings indicated the body had been drained completely of blood either before or shortly after the time of death.

The body of the city's 24th murder victim of the year was found by a group of children playing behind the Recreation Center.

"Thanks," I said, pushing my plate — and the copy of the Milltown *Pioneer* back at him. "I always like a little light reading with lunch." It was obvious, though, that Father was trying very hard to control himself.

"I won't beat around the bush, Burton. What do you know about this."

I was still a little slow. I said, "You know I never look at the paper —" Then: "— wait a minute, what are you getting at here. Are you telling me you think I've murdered someone!" I sat back and laughed, even though I knew it wasn't funny. Obviously, from the way he stared at me, I was a prime suspect. The fact that such a lurid article was stashed on page four confirmed it. If his son might be involved, in any way, he didn't want it publicized, not yet anyway. Turning me in once he'd confirmed my guilt was another matter, of course. His stoicism and courage under fire had always been ready for display. He stood up and went to the window.

"There is a fact this article fails to mention. This poor woman was the seventh to be found completely drained in the last ten months. Seven!" He turned dramatically. "Now I'm asking you again what you know."

I shook my head. "You're absolutely incredible, pop —"

"Damn you, Burton!" He slammed his fists to the table so hard the plates jumped. "I won't tolerate your careless arrogance. Answer my question!"

"No, you tell me something. You actually believe I'm capable of murder!"

"Of course you are! You're physically equipped to have done this *thing*." His lip curled with disgust. "You have the need for blood factor, without the financial means to purchase infusions on your own. And you appear to be in good repair at the moment."

"I've been careful."

"In light of your past history I have to doubt that."

"No. No, I'm not arguing this on

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your ground, Father. No documenting when and where I've taken blood. You've often speculated about that, haven't you? A rare vicarious thrill, your own son stealing the blood he needs to live. Not without its sexual connotations either! Why don't you call the police if you think I'm responsible? I'm sure their investigation can settle the matter one way or another."

"My intention was to give you the benefit of the doubt."

"Thank you! Thank you very much, Father. That means you must have other suspects. I'm not the only one Claigborne *fixed.*"

"You're not. In this city there are three others. However, they are all older men, lacking the vitality to commit such crimes. And they can afford infusions when needed." He leveled his gaze at me. "That leaves you."

I didn't reply. To make any further protest would acknowledge murder.

"Must I take your silence as an affirmation of guilt?"

"Fuck you," I said. But even this obscenity, uttered in his retreat, couldn't shake him.

"Swear to me you didn't do this."

"I've had enough. Good-bye, Father." He moved swiftly to block my exit, and for a moment I thought he might knock me down. He was trembling like a birch in the grip of a violent storm. "Swear," he said, gritting his teeth, forcing the words. "*Please.*"

"It couldn't possibly mean anything to you. Good-bye." This time I pushed him aside with surprising ease — the strength seemed to have gone out of him — and ran down the staircase. I ran into Mother, pulling her gloves on in front of the fountain.

"Did you have a nice talk, Burt?" Her tone was anxious.

"Like old times. Where's my bike?"

"It's against the side of the house. I'll have Emilio bring it around for you."

"Not necessary." I kissed her and whispered, "Call you next week. Thanks for asking me." Then I ran outside into the bright afternoon.

It wasn't until I was on the parkway again that I realized just how angry I was. In ten minutes, Franklin Nordstrum had stripped away my posture of a normal man living a normal life, and now it was as if I were eighteen again, staring weakly up from my hospital bed with Claigborne standing over and explaining in his bored, nasal voice just what he had done to me in the operating room. "What you have now, basically," he'd said, "is an intake running from your mouth and esophagus, directly into your bloodstream. This is coupled to a system of valves and pumps under the direct control of a volume-monitoring system, so that for each unit of whole blood or blood products you ingest, a unit of your own blood is released into the upper portion of the duodenum, just below the pyloric constriction of the stomach. You'll digest it normally, the way you would food, and the sole effect will be an increase in the nitrogenous component of

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the urine, along with an increase in the amount of water you must drink."

Then Father had stepped in, standing straight and tall. "From now on," he'd said, "should you start bleeding, you will have to take steps to secure the blood yourself. Whether you convince someone to allow you to take theirs, or whether you must seize it through violence doesn't concern me. My concern for you ends here, in this room."

Brave words, even noble in their way, profoundly noble in inverse degree to Claigborne's statement. To Father, the expense and risk had been carried through as a preventive measure. He'd never intended me to use the ducts and inlet valves he'd paid Claigborne to install. He fully expected me to lock myself into my own version of his Rubber Room for the rest of my life. If ever I injured myself, I was to take the noble, moral way out: to lie inside a warm tub and slowly expire in the fashion of a Roman senator.

But I did not murder that poor woman. I thought about how certain he was that I had, of his demand that I *swear* as though *swearing* could change anything, and I felt ready to explode.

I was thinking too hard, too furious to know where I was going. A high-pitched scream brought me to; at the last moment I saw a little kid on a trike rolling out of the end of a driveway right into my path.

There was no way to avoid hitting him but standing on both brakes and then dumping the bike. I'd left the pads and helmet back at Arabesque, and I hit the street hard, my right hip and shoulder taking the worst of the impact. Then I rolled almost ten meters past where the kid sat wailing with fright at the bike that had gone flying over his head. In a couple of seconds I was up, trying to clear my head and figure out what had happened. Meanwhile, the kid's mother, having found her child in one piece, ran over to check on me.

I found the sickness in my stomach as I assessed the damage. The whole side of my arm was scraped raw, though that wasn't a big problem. In the fridge at home I had a vial of Russell's viper venom, a powerful coagulant that stopped surface injuries. But already I felt an ache above my hips, behind and below my stomach. If I was bleeding into the illiacus muscle there, I was in for trouble Russell's venom couldn't help.

"Jesus, mister, are you all right?"

"Yeah ... think so." I got up slowly, put my hands on my hips and tried rotating the upper part of my body. The ache was definitely there. "How about him?" I asked.

"He's scared, that's all. I don't know how you missed him."

I worked up a smile. "I wasn't going to cream a little kid. It's my fault anyhow — I should have been watching."

She didn't disagree, but asked if she could call a doctor.

"No, I'm okay. Maybe you can

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help me with my bike."

At that point I was holding my breath to keep from gasping; the woman pushed her hair back and gathered the wreckage, which was still rideable after we straightened the handlebars. When it was right, I wheeled the bike back to make sure I hadn't done anything worse than scare the kid. Tears on his cheeks seemed to be the only thing wrong. He looked at me, and something like understanding passed between us. Then I realized he was wearing a helmet and pads, that he was a bleeder like me. And this wasn't the rich stretch of the parkway, either. I got on the bike.

"I'm glad I didn't hit him, lady. You don't know how damn glad I am." Before she could answer, I was off again, every pedal-stroke like a knife in the guts.

I knew that I was, indeed, in for trouble.

By the time I got home, the blood-engorged illiacus and psoas muscles inside my hips were starting to compress my femoral nerve. My feet fell asleep underneath me; that, and the pain, made it tough for me to get up the stairway to the loft. But I didn't panic. I knew what I had to do and went right to work.

Next to my refrigerator was a tall wood cabinet that held a bleeder's arsenal of supplies: bandages, syringes, bottles of distilled water, chemical ice-packs, alcohol, tourniquets, cotton. There was also the rucksack Claiborne had given me with equipment of a slightly different nature. I hadn't opened it in almost three years; if I was lucky, I wouldn't have to use it now.

I laid the stuff I needed on the kitchen table, got the viper preparation and mixed it with a little distilled water. Then I eased out of my shirt. Scrapes oozed steadily on my arm, but fortunately there were no deep gashes. I cleaned the wound with a wet cotton pad before I applied the venom, dabbing gingerly because it hurt like hell. But soon I felt the skin tightening; after a few minutes, most of the oozing stopped. I was ready for the major problem.

In the back of my freezer was a little bottle of cryo-precipitate AHG, a present from Mother last Christmas. She gave me one a year, bought, I suppose, with money squirreled from her wardrobe allowance. Father didn't know about it, a testament both to her love for me and her skill at juggling the books. The frosty bottle, smaller than the palm of my hand, sold for seven grand — if you could find someone willing to sell it to you. I was praying that one would be enough.

The problem was that precipitate was stored as freeze-dried crystals that kept about a year, with the effectiveness in starting the clotting mechanism gradually decreasing with time. As a component of plasma or fresh whole blood, the factor VIII had a half-life of only twelve hours, and sometimes even

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frozen precipitate could be almost worthless. With the world on the blood standard, much of the raw product came from third-world nations where there were actually "farms" which housed and properly fed a population of nonbleeders from whom the precious tissue was steadily extracted. Some of their lab and processing equipment wasn't the best. Sometimes they waited to collect a large enough batch to make the processing cheaper, like milk. I trusted Mother to buy the best she could, but sometimes even the rich have to take what they can get.

I drew a pan of warm water from the tap and put in the AHG to warm approximately to body temperature. Then from the cabinet I got a double-ended needle and a bottle of diluent that also had to heat a little. Most bleeders treating themselves at home would then think about putting on a tourniquet and finding an elbow vein. But that was something I didn't have to worry about. Instead, I took a power pack off a charging unit plugged to the closet outlet. After one final check to make sure I had everything on the table I needed, I sat down and probed the skin between my shoulderblades for the site of a circular subcutaneous patch. The prongs on the power pack were sheathed with plastic I pulled off with my teeth. I closed my eyes, lined the pack up, and pressed the surgically sharp prongs into my back.

My inner systems activated one by one. I could feel the pump motor set deep into the top of my chest vibrating as the esophagal valve clicked into the open position, linking that part of my digestive tract directly to the right interior jugular. From there, the serum would travel under heart power to the right innominate vein directly into the superior vena cava and the heart. Because of the relatively small amount of fluid I'd be drinking, the lower portion of the system, the pump and valve situated along the superior mesenteric vein, linking that vessel to the hepatic duct into the duodenum would probably not activate. It was all up to the microprocessors in my throat.

The precipitate had warmed enough to liquefy. I stuck one end of the needle through the cap, tilted the bottle, then pierced the diluent cap with the other point. The vacuum in that bottle drew the precipitate into solution. I shook it, removed the cap, and saluted my relationship with Luck before I tilted my head back and drank it down.

I don't know how long it was before I returned to my senses, heart still pounding from the waves of ecstasy produced by a part of the system Claigborne had never told Franklin about. He'd intended that his cyborg would survive, and to ensure that, he provided the microprocessors with a link to the hippocampus of my brain. Whenever I drank through the pumps, a series of low-voltage pulses transported me into a sea of pure pleasure. I was just like one of those rats in the

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lab that'll press a bar until they drop just to keep the juice going. It was positive reinforcement, and I always wondered what Father would have made of it.

At length the pump stopped vibrating, signaling that the saving factor was into my bloodstream. Carefully, I disconnected the power pack, put it and the rest of my kit carefully away. My legs and feet were pins and needles, but at least my arm had stopped bleeding. All I could do now was wait to find out if the infusion would be enough.

I made a point of reconnecting the power pack to the charger outlet just in case it wasn't.

The worst thing I could have done was lie around in bed waiting to find out for sure. That only would have weakened the damaged muscles still further, making them prone to bleed more later on. I was bruised and sore, the way anyone who'd taken that kind of spill would have been. The best thing for me was to get out and walk it off as well as I could. So I warmed myself some soup for dinner, and then, seeing a good moon rise on a crystal-clear evening, I decided to return to the Night Stair and shoot another sequence of pictures.

Thank God for my brass pole. Sliding down it saved me from hobbling with my equipment down the stairs. Then it was just a matter of throwing the stuff into the back of my car and driving to the river road, where I stopped at a service entrance that was blocked by a lift-gate. I had the card that opened this, courtesy of a friend who worked for the university. Once through the gate, the road dropped quickly down to river level alongside the uni nursing school, a couple of hundred meters from the base of the Night Stair. I stashed the car by some trash bins, then grunted and limped my way to the place I'd taken the spoiled sequence a few days before.

Since it was a school night, students biked past me on their way to class. Maybe it was because of the way I was moving, but everyone seemed in a big hurry — no time for the hellos you usually got from people there. Four or five nursing students passed me on foot, and they were practically running. I noticed that nobody was using the Stair, either. Usually, it was an easy shortcut up to the Westbank car lots, but these women hurried the extra half-kilometer to the Lincoln Avenue bridge and used the elevators there instead. I didn't wonder about it at the time — in fact, I was glad in a way, since I could set up my equipment without worrying about blocking traffic.

I finished in a few minutes, then took a meter reading and decided to wait for the moon to rise a degree or two before shooting. So I lay down in the grass by the Night Stair and tried to figure out whether I was still bleeding or not. For the first time, too, I consid-

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ered what I might have to do if the hemorrhaging hadn't stopped. I lay there and remembered the first time I'd taken blood, two years after Claigborne's surgery.

Somehow, I'd started a bleed in my right calf. The swelling pulled the tendons up so far I had to walk on my heels. This went on for three weeks, in spite of AGH from Mother, and the longer it continued, the angrier I'd become at Franklin. Finally I decided to do what he wanted me to do. He could take the blame for it.

Claigborne had given me a mobile kit with everything I'd just used back at the carriage house, plus a few extras, the most important of which was a hand-held spectral analyzer that could give me an LED reading of a person's blood type from as far away as a hundred meters or so. I had it on the dash of my car as I'd driven around the north side of Milltown at three in the morning, looking for a victim.

At that hour, the only people out were derelicts or bakers. When I'd see someone walking alone, I'd aim the analyzer and wait for a reading, but for almost two hours I'd had no luck at all — either wrong place or wrong blood type or, worse, another bleeder. I'd been about ready to give up for the night when I'd spotted an old man tottering through the cold along Marshall Avenue. The analyzer gave a reading of O positive, AHG factor present. I'd pulled a gun, stopped alongside him and ordered him into the car. He didn't argue; in fact, he looked grateful to get out of the cold.

We drove crosstown to Como Park, and he'd decided he wanted to talk, telling me he was a little down on his luck at the moment. Had a daughter in California, going to school on a scholarship. He hoped to join her pretty quick, just as soon as he could sell some blood to the bank.

"They won't take me more than once every three or four months," he'd said, eyes glistening. I slammed on the brakes.

"Get out." I waved the pistol at him and we went through some bushes into a rose garden. He was still babbling about his daughter when I put a pad soaked with chloroform over his nose. He went limp in a second or two, and I laid him out in the grass. Then I plugged my power pack into my shoulder and went to work, swabbing the bum's neck with alcohol before using the clippers Claigborne had given me to make three perfect x-shaped cuts along the axis of the poor bastard's neck. Immediately, these welled up with glistening blood.

"Here's to your health, Father," I'd said. Then I put my lips to his neck and started drinking. Claigborne's pleasure-mechanism had me shaking as I greedily sucked the wound. I'm not sure how long I drank, or how much, but after a while I remembered sitting up and staring at him as he moaned softly. I felt swollen, just like a leech, but I attended to the rest of the proced-

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ure as Claigborne had described it. I put hand pressure on the wound for three or four minutes, then carefully applied a pressure bandage.

By the time I'd staggered back to the car it was almost light. I'd checked the newspapers — including Franklin's *Pioneer* — for the next few days, hoping I wouldn't find a report about a dead bum in Como Park, but there hadn't been any. The bleeding in my legs stopped. I wasn't a murderer. Thus I was able to wipe the whole thing off my conscience. But I'd never wanted to have to do it again, either.

Finally, the light behind the Night Stair looked right, and I rolled to my feet so I could take the first shot. I must have jumped up pretty suddenly, because I found myself face to face with a woman who'd just come down the Stair. She yelped in shock and, before I could say a word, gave me a pretty good shove with both hands. I hit the ground on the same hip I'd injured before.

"What the hell do you think you're doing!" I yelled. Then I recognized the brown eyes, cool in spite of her surprise and my own anger.

"You're Joanne Thompson!" The eyes didn't change, and for an instant, *I* felt frightened, and then sheepish. "I'm Burt Nordstrum, remember? I took the portraits at your creche."

She looked at my gear and blinked. "Oh. Oh, yes, I'm sorry!" She helped me to my feet. "Are you all right?"

"Sure." I took a few deep breaths while she gathered the books she'd dropped. "You in a habit of running into people?"

"Of course not!" Then she realized I'd been trying to make a joke and flashed a smile I would have crawled a mile to see. "It's just I was in ... a hurry. And you did pop up rather suddenly."

"So I did." My gut was really aching, but staring at her I could almost forget about it.

"I was nervous about coming down the Stair. You know, after what happened here the other day." She laughed. "I don't think I've ever gone down a set of stairs so fast in my life!"

"Wait a minute, what are you talking about? What happened?"

She looked at me strangely, as though she thought I might be joking again. "Hadn't you heard? A teacher was murdered up by the gazebo a couple of nights ago. They found the poor man's body this morning — completely drained of blood. Oh, you are hurt! Let me help you." She guided me to the Stair and I sat down, completely stunned.

Finally, thinking of Father, I said, "Do they know exactly when it happened?"

"The radio said forty-eight hours. Early evening sometime."

"I was here then," I mumbled.

"What?"

"Yeah, I was set up here, just like this, shooting some pictures. Christ, I could have been a witness!" And it was

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at that moment that I remembered the smudges that had spoiled those shots. Had I somehow caught the murderer Father thought was me on film? Thinking about it, I must have looked pretty shocked, because Joanne's eyes got very wide, almost horrified.

"Hey, relax," I said, managing a laugh. "I didn't see a thing. But something like that's scary to think about, you know —" Then I gasped, because the pain had finally gotten to me. The pelvic bleeding was starting all over again.

"Look, I'm sorry I did this to you. Can I help you get your stuff to the bus or something?"

"You've got class, don't you?"

"I couldn't possibly concentrate. Here, take my arm." She helped me up and together we got the stuff packed into the cases and back to the car. In spite of the way I felt, in spite of the trouble I was in, leaning against her was wonderful. She had a dancer's body — probably the reason she'd been able to flatten me. I was almost enjoying myself.

Joanne insisted on driving me back to the carriage house, and I didn't argue. She drove very carefully, as though she was afraid of hurting me more. I leaned back in my seat.

"We don't know each other very well, Joanne, and maybe I shouldn't say this, but you're one of the most sensitive people I've ever met."

She glanced at me again with that coolness that made me afraid I'd offended her. "I didn't realize I was so transparent to you."

"It's not just this. You remember how surprised I was that you ran a day-care center? I couldn't figure it. I'm a photographer, and you've got the face of a model. But there you were, working with ... sick kids for peanuts."

"Ah, so you're telling me I have the wrong sort of life."

"Not at all. It's just that sometimes beautiful women think their beauty is like a gift to everybody else. Like the world owes them for being beautiful."

"I've taken some of that, Burt. I was a model back in New York, but I needed something more. The life I had was too, how shall I say it, directed *inward*. I couldn't base my life on just one person — not on just me. Left here?"

"Yeah." I bit my lip as the pain hit me again. When she pulled into the carriage house drive, I gave her the key to the wooden doors. "Would you mind?"

"Of course not. You know, I've always wondered if anyone actually lived in this place."

"Somebody has to make sure they don't tear it down." I watched her move those doors and realized I was falling in love. Hardly the best time, but then maybe love's meant to reach out during the worst crises. Somehow — maybe it was the emotion of that moment — I was able to slide over and drive the car into the stable. Joanne stood by the door and watched me

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struggle out of the seat.

"Look," I said quickly, "can I make you a drink? It's humble up there, but it's home."

"Maybe it's not a good idea for you to invite me in."

"What are you talking about? It's the least I can do. Come on, at least have some coffee with me. I promise I won't bite." My little joke turned the tide. She agreed to follow me up the wrought-iron stairway. Meanwhile, I did my best not to scream.

"You ought to take some aspirin," she said as I put water on to boil.

"My stomach won't tolerate it." That was true. Aspirin's poison to a bleeder. I got down a couple of cups, filled them with instant coffee. When I turned to ask Joanne if she took cream, there she was staring at a print I had of the grounds of Czar Nicholas' summer palace. Every tree had been beautifully wrapped and padded for the protection of the hemophilic Crown Prince, Alexei.

"You are a bleeder." she said, eyes wide and incredibly cool. "And I've hurt you and now what are you going to do?" It was almost as if she were challenging me, and I thought she was afraid I was trying to use her sympathy to get close to her. That wasn't the way I wanted it.

"You're forgetting the last name's Nordstrum, of the newspaper Nordstrums. Which means treatment's no problem. Anyway, you didn't hit me that hard. I had a spill on my bike earlier today. So I've already had an infusion." I pulled up my sleeve to show her the scrapes on my arm. "See? I've got another set for tomorrow." I went and poured water into the coffee cups. It took everything I had left for me to walk across the loft with those two cups and not spill them. I handed Joanne's over with a smile.

"Here's to luck. And to successful blood-factor synthesis in the laboratory." I could tell she didn't know how to react. So I added, "I live the best way I can, Joanne. It's a challenge. We have to fight it out."

We looked at each other for a long time, emotions passing like clouds across her eyes. She didn't want to take advantage. She didn't want to feel sorry for me, either. Some resentment about the family finances. Admiration and an obvious physical attraction, and something else: mockery, as though she thought I was a fool for being so nonchalant. She put her cup down.

"Yes," she whispered. "We have to fight." Then: "Burt, I should get home. If you're sure you're all right...."

"Please. I don't want to keep you." That was a lie, because I did. "Look, take the car if you want. I can pick it up later."

"I'll take the bus. Thanks."

"You're sure."

"I'd like you to call me."

"Natch, when the portraits are done."

"Call me tomorrow. I want to

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know how you're getting along."

"Okay. In fact, just to prove I'll make it — what are you doing tomorrow night?"

"I have a class."

"Okay. I still have to finish my Night Stair shots. Why don't we meet when you're done, say about ten thirty. I guarantee I'll be turning handstands by then, and when I'm through, we can celebrate with a *galzone* at Rosa's. What do you say?"

For the first time that night, her eyes lit up. "Ten thirty. Where I ran into you." Her face got a little red.

"Hey, don't worry about me. I mean it."

"I wish I didn't have to," she said, kissing me suddenly and then fleeing down the steps and out onto Cedar. I could see her waiting for the bus through one of the front windows. I watched her a moment, then went to my supply cabinet. Inside was Claigborne's rucksack with the spectral analyzer in one of the side pouches.

I opened the window so that the glass wouldn't interfere with the reading. Then I turned the analyzer on and aimed it at Joanne. The display showed O positive, blood factor present. I almost cried. Then I almost smashed the analyzer against the brick wall, but I didn't do that either. Instead, I pulled my bed out from the couch and flopped onto my side. Lying like that with my knees drawn up relieved some of the pressure on the femoral nerve. The pain subsided.

With the lights still on and the analyzer clutched in my hand, I fell into blessed, dreamless sleep.

The second time I'd taken blood, I'd asked for it.

I'd had a stupid accident with pieces of glass frame I'd dropped and ended up slicing a vein in my forearm — fortunately a small one, but I'd still lost a lot of blood before I could get the uni health service to sew it up for me. The intern on duty advised me to apply for the emergency infusion lottery upstairs, but I knew I'd never get past the financial part of the screening. I'd gone back onto the street knowing I'd have to hit someone. The only alternative would be to lie in the gutter and die.

As it happened, a guy I knew from darkroom lab had invited me to a party for that night. I kept myself going with juice all day and then brought my rucksack with me to his big rundown house. My analyzer had been hanging around my neck on a cord; I told anyone who asked that it was a light meter.

Almost two hours after I arrived I found my victim. She was short, blonde, and almost too drunk to stand on the high shoes she was wearing. The analyzer'd given me the right readings, plus I'd seen her come in alone. So I went into the bathroom, plugged in my powerpack, shuddering as the pumps buzzed inside my chest. I wanted that blood, and desire kept me going. When

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I came out I went to work on her.

My pitch was pure sex, and I'd laid it on thick as I could. I started witty and light, shepherding her to the keg table, then to the room in the back where the joints were going around, making sure she got her share. When somebody offered her some pills, I'd made a big show of taking them away — for her own good, I'd said. She laughed at that.

By then my knees were starting to shake; but the party had quieted down and we found a corner. I put her on my lap and started kissing her neck, really working at it, running the tip of my tongue lightly over her soft, warm skin until she'd squirmed and kissed me on the mouth. Her eyes had looked desperate and sad. I avoided them.

"Take me home," she'd said. I'd told her sex wasn't enough for a woman like her, that I knew how to do something to her that was an even bigger rush. She let me take her to the back yard to prove it.

There was an old Caddy on blocks next to the garage, and I'd laid her out on the back seat. She'd unzipped her jeans and started pulling them down, but I held her arms.

"Tell me you want me to live," I said.

"Course I do —"

I squeezed harder. "You want me to live." I ran my hand over her crotch until she repeated the words. Then: "You'll give me some of your blood, won't you?"

"Blood?"

"You'll come harder than you ever did before." Her panties were wet, and in a moment she was telling me yes, over and over again. I had the clippers ready. Three red x's glistened on her throat; I pressed my lips tight and started sucking, shaking as Claigborne's pleasure mechanism took hold. I could hear the girl moaning. She did come, and hard. Then she fainted, eyes rolled up, swollen lips pulled away from the tips of her teeth. The drugs in her blood had started affecting me, but I'd managed to wipe the wound and tape it before I stumbled off into the night.

I'd woken up the next morning underneath a park bench. The bleeding in my arm had stopped.

I fell on my face when I tried getting out of bed. It took pure will to get up again and force myself to pace tight circles on the rug. Aside from the pain, I felt horribly weak; the bleeding had to be worse than I'd figured. I knew that if I didn't do something soon I wouldn't be able to move. So I drank half a bottle of grapefruit juice and went to the phone and dialed my Mother's line at Arabesque.

"Hello?" I didn't say anything. "Who is this?"

"Mom."

"Burt?" She sounded disappointed.

"Mom, I'm in trouble. I need an infusion, there's been an accident. I'm bleeding."

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Her voice caught, then silence.

"Didn't you hear me? I'm sick, Mal I have to have the precipitate."

"I can't help you, Burt." Her voice was cold, and it took several moments for the words to sink in.

"Can't help ... Mom, I know it costs. I've never asked you before, have I? I wouldn't now, except...." I couldn't tell her the rest because I never wanted her to know what I was.

"I understand you didn't have a very good meeting with your Father yesterday." From the way she said it, I knew that had to be the reason she wasn't listening to me. I got mad.

"Did he tell you what we talked about?"

"He said you preferred he didn't. In any case, he's forbidden me to give you any more help. He's known all along what I've been giving you each year, and it's to be cut off. Those are his instructions to me, Burt. There's nothing I can do."

"You want me to die? Is that what you want?"

"No. He told me ... you had another source."

"Another bum bleeder dead in the gutter, is that what you want!"

I heard her sob, and then the line went dead.

So, it had finally come to this. Years ago, Father had drawn a line, and now he had taken Mother over to the other side with him. But I had no intention of dying, not now, not ever. If the only way to live was to become a vampire! I opened my wallet, found a number scrawled on one of my business cards, dialed it with a shaking hand.

"Portland Avenue Day Care. This is Joanne Thompson."

The sound of her soft, unsuspecting voice hit me like a hammer. It was wrong to ask Joanne. "Who is this?" she said. I hung up the phone, even though I knew I might have been able to convince her to help me, to give blood to a friend and fellow spirit, to a potential lover. But that wouldn't have hurt Franklin Nordstrum. I remembered how he'd accused me of murder, of the look on his face when he'd demanded I *swear*, and I knew what I had to do. I dragged myself to the darkroom and brought out the ruined prints of the Night Stair. The smudge near the gazebo must have been the real killer's face, blurred by the long exposure. Maybe Claigborne had built himself another monster. And the mighty Franklin Nordstrum, for all his pontificating, had given Claigborne his start. That was something Father was going to have to face up to. Right now.

I went to the cabinet and got the rucksack, plugged the power pack into my neck, then painfully pulled on a heavy wool sweater to hide it. I put the images into the rucksack too before I slid down the brass pole to the car. I wouldn't be needing the analyzer.

Franklin Nordstrum had the same O positive blood I did.

* * *

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Anger kept me going to the neoclassical facade of the *Pioneer* building downtown. The guard in the lobby remembered me and let me pass without signing in. Upstairs in Father's office suite, Ollie, who'd been his secretary 27 years, recognized me too.

"Burt!" she smiled, "you haven't been here for, gosh —"

"Ten years. Hi, Ollie. Dad busy?"

"Editorial conference right now." She checked her watch. "Should be over in a few minutes. I'll buzz him."

"No, ah, listen, I'd like to surprise him. You think you can spare him for five minutes?"

"Sure." She opened the door to the inner office. "Why don't you wait for him. Can I get you some coffee?"

"No, thanks. Just pretend I'm not here, okay?"

She winked and closed the door behind her. I sat down on the couch and tried to think the pain away, but it was hard, here in another of Father's refuges. The office was paneled in dark wood, with news awards and framed photos on the walls: Father shaking hands with governors, with presidents, military men. A mace leaned on a stand in the corner; in the opposite corner were state and U.S. flags. Today's *Pioneer* lay unopened on the coffee table. I started scanning the front section.

On page four there was a three-inch sidebar about the professor. No connection between that one and the Progress Park thing, Franklin covering for me still. I was staring at the story when Father returned from his conference.

"Got a surprise for you, chief," I heard Ollie tell him. I put down the paper, sucked in my chest and got to my feet.

He frowned but continued with a batch of paperwork to his desk. "I heard you bothered your mother this morning," he said. "You've upset her. That will stop, Burton. I'm severing all connection with you. So don't think you can get anything out of me by begging." He leaned toward his intercom. "What's next, Ollie?"

"Press Club lunch."

"Thank you." He hadn't even looked at me.

"I don't want anything from you," I said. "Just wanted to show you this." I put the photos on his desk.

"What's this?"

"My alibi. Taken three nights ago, near the university place called the Night Stair. Right around where that professor was found dead. I think I might have snapped the killer."

He looked at the image, then at me, expression softened some. "You've proof of when this was taken?"

"No."

"Then it's of no use."

"Maybe not. I brought it to show you I'm not the monster you think I am. I want to clear some of the doubt from your mind before you're forced to call the police." I grunted with the pain in my gut.

"What's the matter with you?"

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"I was hurt yesterday, Father. Fell off my bike, just as you thought I would." I reached into my rucksack. "I don't intend to go on bleeding." When I aimed my pistol at him, his eyebrows rose, nothing more.

"Don't be absurd," he said mildly.

"Oh, I'm quite serious, Father. I need blood, and I'm going to take it — from you."

He laughed. "You expect me to lie down and allow you to bite my throat?"

"Shut up! Your blood's the same to me whether you're alive or dead. And I'll kill you if I have to. Take off your tie!"

He did as I ordered, pure menace in his eyes — then suddenly swung his arm against my head. The gun hit the wall on the other side of the room. A moment later, he had me by the throat.

"Listen to me. I'll give you three minutes before I call the police. Leave this city, Burton, because if you don't, if I or your Mother ever hear from you again, I shall have you tracked down and brought to trial for your crimes." He shook me so hard I thought I'd faint, then released me. "Take my blood! You couldn't take the blood of a lamb. Now get out, you've lost fifteen seconds already." I fled past Ollie, past the guard, into my car, barely able to see because of the pain and humiliation. Then I realized the police would have a description of the car. So I left it on the street and caught a bus for the university. Somehow, the Night Stair offered refuge: I got off the bus and walked, one painful step at a time, to the gazebo. There I collapsed next to a weeping willow, rolled like a crippled animal into the safety of the tree's drooping canopy, and lay there, ready to die.

But I did not die. The day passed in periods of unconsciousness separated by episodes of dreamy, almost ecstatic delirium. I remembered the date I'd made with Joanne, and I thought about how she'd help me if I asked. She'd give her blood to me, and then I'd leave Milltown, start over, build my fortune so this would never happen to me again. Then I imagined her face as I was telling her these things and knew I was kidding myself. I'd never be anything but a bleeder with a will to survive and the means to steal blood from other people's bodies. Maybe it was better that it ended here.

The idea filled me with incredible peace. Joanne might offer to save me, but I'd refuse. Let her beg me to take her blood, I'd still refuse!

I blacked out again, and when I came to I looked at my watch and saw it was almost ten thirty. Somehow, I got out from underneath the tree and staggered over to the moonlit gazebo. I was thirsty. So I worked the pump and drank from the icy flow of crystal-pure water. My head cleared a little, and I knew I was still craving Joanne's blood. The knowledge shamed me, but my degradation had already been completed by Franklin that noon. Was it so

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wrong for me to want to live?

I heard rapid footsteps coming from the direction of the car lot. *Joanne,* I thought, *Joanne, I love you* — and then someone else burst from the bushes along the park gate. At first I couldn't figure out what was happening; it looked like two people dancing in the moonlight. Then I heard a gasp: Joanne's gasp.

Rage burst inside me, giving me power. This had to be the murderer, the one who had killed the professor and the others, *and he was trying to take blood that belonged to me.* Instantly I forgot about the pain and ran to where the two of them struggled. He had her by the throat. I grabbed his shoulder, spun him around and smashed him in the face with my fist. He staggered backward with an angry roar, lost his balance — and fell against the brickwork fence. Then he was still.

"Joanne!" I yelled, reaching out, but she swore at me and pushed me back. She had something in her hand; quickly she bent over the man and did something to his neck. Blood dripped onto the grass, but only for an instant, because she crouched low and began to suck. I could hear the faint whir of motors inside her body.

It was like I was paralyzed, unable to do anything until she finally stood up, wiping her mouth with a handkerchief. Her eyes were distant and cool in the moonlight.

"I've left you some," she said.

"No!"

"Don't worry, he's an O. Go ahead, take it. You're hurt aren't you? Go ahead."

I looked down at the man. He groaned softly. "You're not a bleeder. I —"

She held up an analyzer. "Have one of these? It shouldn't surprise you that I showed blood factor the other evening. I'd just taken blood a few days before. Really, Burt, you surprise me. I'd thought you were so nonchalant about all this." She pulled the cowl of her turtleneck away from the powerpack on her shoulder. "I knew about you, Burt, even when I was still in New York. Claigborne told me. Not a very ethical man, but then you and I wouldn't be alive if he was."

"No!" I tried to turn away but she grabbed my shoulders and forced me to look at her.

"I came here because of you, did you know that? Things were getting too hot in New York for me. You see, the problem, Burt, my particular problem, is that I'm a woman. I bleed every month. And when it happens, I have to take blood, lots of blood, to live. And, sometimes, it's so hard to stop taking it; you understand that, don't you, Burt? Some of my donors have died. So I decided to look you up. Have you take a few pictures for the school. Find out where you lived and what you did. And make myself a perfect alibi."

I'd sunk to my knees. Joanne stood over me and laughed. "You were so

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noble the other night! I knew it'd be easy. All I had to do was come here and take some blood. And with you too weak to move — well, sooner or later someone'll come along and find you here next to this poor man, and I'm safe. You don't blame me, do you, Burt? It's not our fault we bleed. And you said yourself we have to live as best we can." She put her rucksack over her shoulder. "But I really should be going. Wouldn't do to find all of us here."

"Joanne —"

"Oh, I'm not the monster you think I am. I've left you a way out, haven't I? There's blood for you to take. So take it. Take it and live!" Then she turned and disappeared into the shadows of the gazebo.

I stared at the man she had drained. Already the wounds on his neck had started to clot.

The wind stirred the lilacs in the park at the top of the Night Stair.

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Harlan Ellison's last Christmas story here was "Santa Claus Vs. S.P.I.D.E.R." (January 1969), which updated the jolly one into a lean, mirthless secret agent and sent dozens of traditionalists screaming to their typewriters to cancel their subscriptions. I am afraid that there may be the tiniest bit of a similar quality to this latest tale, but it does at least put the Christ back into Christmas.

The Outpost Undiscovered by Tourists

BY
HARLAN ELLISON

They camped just beyond the perimeter of the dream and waited for first light before beginning the siege.

Melchior went to the boot of the Rolls and unlocked it. He rummaged about till he found the air mattress and the inflatable television set and brought them to the cleared circle. He pulled the cord on the mattress and it hissed and puffed up to its full size, king size. He pulled the plug on the television set and it hissed and firmed up and he snapped his fingers and it turned itself on.

"No," said Kaspar, "I will not stand for it! Not another night of roller derby. A King of Orient I are, and I'll be *damned* if I'll lose another night's sleep listening to those barely primate creatures dropkicking each other!"

Melchior glowed with his own night light. "So sue me," he said, settling down on the air mattress, tidying his moleskin cape around him. "You know I've got insomnia. You know I've got a strictly awful hiatus hernia. You know those *latkes* are sitting right here on my chest like millstones. Be a person for a change, a *mensch*, it couldn't hurt just once."

Kaspar lifted the chalice of myrrh, the symbol of death, and shook it at Melchior. "Hypochondriac! That's what you are, a fake, a fraud. You just like watching those honkytonk bimbos punching each other out. Hiatus hernia, my fundament! You'd watch mud wrestling and extol the esthetic virtues of the balletic nuances. Turn it off ... or at least, in the name of Jehovah, get the Sermonette."

"The ribs are almost ready," Balthazar interrupted. "You want the mild or the spicy sauce?"

Kaspar raised his eyes to the star far above them, out of reach but madden-

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ingly close. He spoke to Jehovah: "And this one goes ethnic on us. Wandering Jew over there drives me crazy with the light that never dims, watches institutionalized mayhem all night and clanks all day with gold chains ... and Black-is-Beautiful over there is determined I'll die of tertiary heartburn before I can even find the Savior. Thanks, Yahweh, thanks a lot. Wait till *you* need a favor."

"Mild or spicy?" Balthazar said with resignation.

"I'd like mine with the mild," Melchior said sweetly. "And just a *bissel* apple sauce on the side, please."

"I want dimsum," Kaspar said. His malachite chopsticks materialized in his left hand, held far up their length, indicating he was of the highest caste.

"He's only being petulant," Melchior said. "He shouldn't annoy, Balthazar sweetie. Serve them cute and tasty ribs."

"Deliver me," Kaspar murmured.

So they ate dinner, there under the star. The Nubian king, the Scrutable Oriental king, and the Hebrew king. And they watched the roller derby. They also played the spelling game called *ghost*, but ended the festivity abruptly and on a rancorous note when Balthazar and Melchior ganged up on Kaspar using the word "pringles," which Kaspar contended was *not* a generic but a specific trade name. Finally they fell asleep, the television set talking to itself, the light from Melchior reflecting off the picture tube.

In the night the star glowed brightly, calling them on even in their sleep. And in the night early-warning reconnaissance troops of the Forces of Chaos flew overhead flapping their leathery bat-wings and leaving in their wake the hideous carbarn monoxide stench of British Leyland double-decker buses.

When Melchior awoke in the morning, his first words were, "In the night, who made a ka-ka?"

Balthazar pointed. "Look."

The ground was covered with the permanent shadows of the bat-troops that had flown overhead. Dark, sooty shapes of fearsome creatures in full flight.

"I've always thought they looked like the flying monkeys in the 1939 MGM production of *The Wizard of Oz*, special effects by Arnold Gillespie, character make-up created by Jack Dawn," Kaspar said ruminatively.

"Listen, Yellow Peril," Balthazar said, "you can exercise that junkheap memory for trivia later. Unless the point is lost on you, what this means is that they know we're coming and they're going to be ready for us. We've lost the element of surprise."

Melchior sighed and added, "Not to mention that we've been following the star for exactly one thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine years, give or take a fast minute, which unless they aren't too clever should have tipped them off we were on the way some time ago."

"Nonetheless," said Kaspar, and

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fascinated by the word he said it again, "nonetheless."

They waited, but he didn't finish the sentence.

"And on that uplifting note," Balthazar said, "let us get in the wind before they catch us out here in the open."

So they gathered their belongings — Melchior's caskets of Krugerrands, his air mattress and inflatable television set; Kaspar's chalice of myrrh, his Judy Garland albums and fortune-cookie fortune calligraphy set; Balthazar's wok, his brass-bound collected works of James Baldwin and hair-conking outfit — and they stowed them neatly in the boot of the Rolls.

Then, with Balthazar driving (but refusing once again to wear the chauffeur's cap on moral grounds), they set out under the auspices of power steering, directly through the perimeter of the dream.

The star continued to shine overhead. "Damnedest thing I ever saw," Kaspar remarked, for the ten thousandth time. "Defies all the accepted laws of celestial mechanics."

Balthazar mumbled something.

For the ten thousandth time.

"What's that, I didn't hear?" Melchior said.

"I said: at least if there was a pot of gold at the end of all this..."

It was unworthy of him, as it had been ten thousand times previously, and the others chose to ignore it.

At the outskirts of the dream, a rundown section lined with fast-food stands, motels with waterbeds and closed-circuit vibrating magic-fingers cablevision, bowling alleys, Polish athletic organizations and used-rickshaw lots, they encountered the first line of resistance from the Forces of Chaos.

As they stopped for a traffic light, thousands of bat-winged monkey-faced troops leaped out of alleys and doorways with buckets of water and sponges and began washing their windshield.

"Quick, Kaspar!" Balthazar shouted.

The Oriental king threw open the rear door on the right side and bounded out into the street, brandishing the chalice of myrrh. "Back, back, scum of the underworld!" he howled.

The troops of Chaos shrieked in horror and pain and began dropping what appeared to be dead all over the place, setting up a wailing and a crying and a screaming that rose over the dream like dark smoke.

"Please, already," Melchior shouted. "Do we need all this noise? All this *geshrying!* You'll wake the baby!"

Then Balthazar was gunning the motor, Kaspar leaped back into the rear seat, the door slammed and they were off, through the red light — which had, naturally, been rigged to stay red, as are all such red lights, by the Forces of Chaos. All that day they lay siege to the dream.

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The Automobile Club told them they couldn't get there from here. The speed traps were set at nine miles per hour. Sects of religious fanatics threw themselves under the steel-belteds. But finally they came to the Manger, a Hyatt establishment, and they fought their way inside with the gifts, all tasteful.

And there, in a moderately priced room, they found the Savior, tended by an out-of-work cabinetmaker, a lady who was obviously several bricks shy of a load who kept insisting she had been raped by God, various shepherds, butchers, pet store operators, boutique salesgirls, certified public accountants, hawkers of T-shirts, investigative journalists, theatrical hangers-on, Sammy Davis, Jr., and a man who owned a whippet that was reputed to be able to catch two Frisbees at the same time.

And the three kings came in, finding it hard to find a place there in the crowd, and they set down their gifts and stared at the sleeping child.

"We'll call him Jomo," said Balthazar, asserting himself.

"Don't be a jerk," Kaspar said. "Merry Jomomas? We'll call him Lao-Tzu. It flows, it sings, it soars."

So they argued about that for quite a while and finally settled on Christ, because in conjunction with Jesus it was six and five, and that would fit all the marquees.

But still, after two thousand years, they were unsettled. They stared down at the sleeping child, who looked like all babies: like a small, soft W.C. Fields who had grown blotchy drinking wine sold before its time; and Balthazar mumbled, "I'd have been just as happy with a pot of gold," and Kaspar said, "You'd think after two thousand years someone would at least offer me a chair," and Melchior summed up all their hopes and dreams for a better world when he said, "You know, it's funny, but he don't look Jewish."

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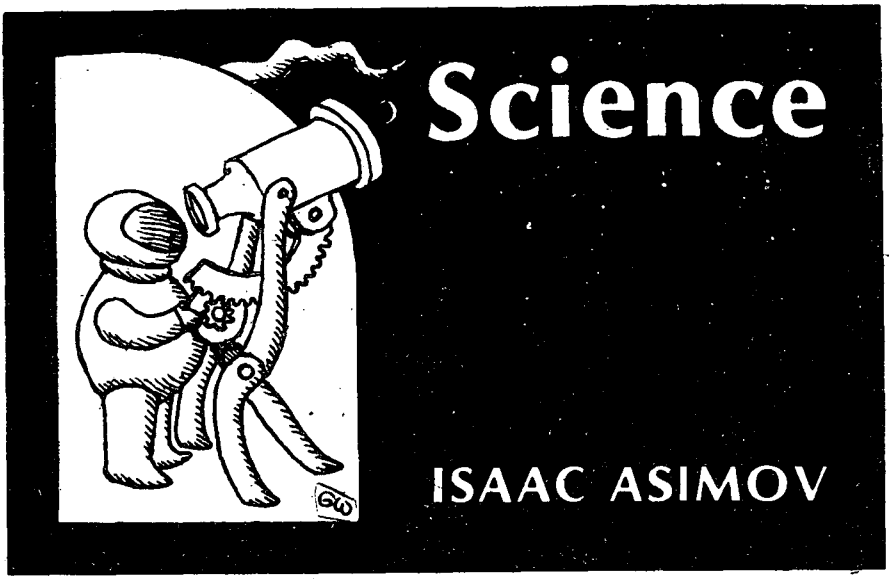

THE LONG ELLIPSE

I married Janet on November 30, 1973, and a couple of weeks later we had our closest approach to a formal honeymoon. We went off on a three-day cruise on the *Queen Elizabeth 2* in order to see Kohoutek's Comet.

As it happened, the sky was uniformly cloudy and it dripped rain constantly so we saw nothing. Even if the sky had been clear we would have seen nothing, for the comet belied its early promise and never grew brighter than a minimal naked-eye visibility. It didn't matter. Under the circumstances, we enjoyed ourselves anyway.

Kohoutek himself was on board, and he was scheduled to give a speech. Janet and I crowded into the theater with the rest.

Janet said, "It's *so* nice to be on a trip where *you* don't have to work and make speeches and we can just sit back and listen."

Just as she said that, the master of ceremonies announced the depressing news that we would not hear Kohoutek after all because he was confined to his cabin with an indisposition.

A soft sigh of disappointment arose from the audience, and Janet's heart (which is as soft as warm butter) ached for everyone there. She jumped to

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her feet and called out, "My husband, Isaac Asimov, will be glad to give a talk on comets, if that's all right with you."

I was horrified, but the audience seemed willing to accept something rather than nothing, and in no time at all I found myself on the stage with welcoming applause in my ears. I hastily improvised a talk on comets and afterward said to Janet, "But I thought you had just said it was so nice to be on a trip where I *didn't* have to talk."

"It's different when you volunteer," she explained.

"But I didn't volunteer, Janet. *You* volunteered."

"What's the difference?" she asked, and that's how I found out I was married.

Now we are approaching the time when Halley's Comet* will be appearing in the sky again. Because of the relative position of the comet and Earth when it flashes by, it won't be a very spectacular appearance, but it still deserves an essay, I think.

Halley's Comet is, by all odds, the most famous of them all.

It has been appearing in Earth's sky every 75 or 76 years for an indefinite period of time, certainly since 467 B.C., when there is the first recorded, and surviving, description of it. Suppose we number that appearance as #1.

We don't have records of all the later appearances. For instance, #2 (391 B.C.) and #3 (315 B.C.) are blanks.

The first notable appearance was #7 (11 B.C.) since it is possible that Jesus of Nazareth was born at that time or not long after. There have been suggestions, therefore, that it was Halley's Comet which gave rise to the tradition of the "Star of Bethlehem."

Comets generally were viewed as portents of disaster, and whenever one appeared in the sky, everyone was sure that something terrible would happen. Nor were they ever disappointed, for something terrible always did happen. Of course, something terrible always happened when a comet wasn't in the sky, too, but no one paid attention to that. To have done so would have been rational, and who wants to be that?

The kind of comet-proclaimed disaster most usually expected was the death of a reigning ruler (though, considering the character and ability of most rulers, it remains a mystery why that should be considered such a disaster).

* *Short "a" please. I hear entirely too many people giving it a long "a" as though it were "Haley" — an insupportable barbarism.*

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Thus, in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Calpurnia warns Caesar of ill-omens in the heavens, and says:

When beggars die, there are no comets seen;
The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.

In A.D. 837, Ludwig the Pious ruled the Frankish Empire. He was a well-intentioned, but thoroughly incompetent Emperor whose reign was a disaster, for all that he was the son of Charlemagne. At that time, he was 58 years old and had been reigning for 23 years, and by the standards of those years it should have surprised no one if, in the ordinary course of nature, he had died at that time.

In that year, however, Halley's Comet made appearance #18, and that made Ludwig's death seem imminent. Actually, he did not die for another four years, but this was nevertheless taken as absolute confirmation of the comet's predictive ability.

Appearance #21 came in 1066 just as William of Normandy was preparing to invade England and as Harold of Wessex was preparing to ward off that invasion. This was a situation in which the comet couldn't lose. It was going to be a disaster for one side or the other. As it turned out and as we all know, it was a disaster for Harold, who died at the Battle of Hastings. William went on to conquer England and to establish a line of monarchs who have remained on the throne ever since, and so the comet was certainly no disaster for him or his line.

Appearance #26 came in 1456, when Halley's Comet proved its ability to predict in retrospect. The Ottoman Turks had taken Constantinople in 1453, and this might well have been taken as the kind of catastrophe that threatened all of Christendom (although by then, Constantinople was the merest shadow of what it had once been and its loss had only symbolic value).

Nevertheless, the fall of Constantinople didn't seem an *official* disaster till the comet showed up. *Then* there was panic and an incessant tolling of churchbells and intoning of prayers.

The next appearance, #27, was in 1532, when, for the first time, something in addition to panicky outcries greeted it. An Italian astronomer, Girolamo Fracastoro (1483-1553), and an Austrian astronomer, Peter Apian (1501-1552), both noticed that the comet's tail pointed away from the Sun. When the comet passed the Sun, moving from one side to the other, the tail changed direction and *still* pointed away from the Sun. This was the first scientific observation on record in connection with comets.

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Appearance #29 came in 1682, and it was then observed by a young English astronomer, Edmund Halley (1656-1742). Halley, who was a good friend of Isaac Newton (1642-1727), was busily engaged in persuading Newton to write a book that would systematize his notions. When the Royal Academy proved reluctant to publish the volume — only the greatest scientific book ever written — because it was likely to be controversial, Halley published it in 1687 at his own expense. (As it happened, he had inherited money in 1684, when his father was found murdered.)

Newton's book included, among other things, his Law of Universal Gravitation, which explained the motions of the planets about the Sun and those of the satellites about the planets.

Might it not explain the motions of the comets as well, remove their apparently unpredictable and erratic appearances, and once and for all banish the silly and baseless panics those appearances engendered?

Halley carefully plotted the path across the sky taken by the comet of 1682 and compared it with the paths taken by other comets, according to those reports that survived. By 1705, he had plotted the course of some two dozen comets and was struck by the fact that the comets of 1456, 1532, 1607, and 1682 had all followed about the same path and had appeared at intervals of about 75 years.

For the first time it occurred to someone that different comets might actually be different periodic appearances of the same comet. Halley suggested this concerning these comets — that it was one comet following a fixed orbit about the Sun and that it would appear once more in 1758.

Although Halley lived to the great age of 86, he could not live long enough to see whether his prediction would be verified or not, and he had to endure considerable bad jokes at his expense on the part of those who thought the attempt to predict the arrival of comets to be laughable. As an example, the master-satirist, Jonathan Swift, included a few ill-natured jokes on the subject in the third part of *Gulliver's Travels*.

But Halley was right just the same. On Christmas Day of 1758, a comet was seen approaching, and, in early 1759, it blazed in Earth's sky. From then on, it was known as Halley's Comet, and this was appearance #30.

Appearance #31 came in 1835. That was the year in which Samuel Langhorne Clemens ("Mark Twain") was born. Toward the end of his life, when family disasters had broken him down into depression and bitterness, he said repeatedly that he had come with the comet and would go with it. He was right. It had blazed in the sky when he was born and it blazed again in its appearance #32 in 1910 when he died.

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You might think that once the orbits of at least some comets were worked out, and their appearances shown to be in automatic response to the clock-work-like predictions of the law of gravity, that comets generally would be viewed cold-bloodedly, with admiration, of course but not with fear.

Not so. It turned out that astronomers felt that Halley's comet would come close enough for Earth to pass through its tail, and at once a howl went up from an incredible number of simple souls to the effect that Earth would be destroyed. At the very least, they insisted, the noxious gases in the comet's tail would poison Earth's atmosphere.

There *were* noxious gases in the comet's tail, but the tail was so rarefied that there would be more such gas in the exhaust of a passing automobile than in a million cubic kilometres of comet-tail.

There was, however, no use in trying to explain this, because it would involve that horrid old property of rationality. Besides, each ill wind blows good to some people. A number of enterprising rascals made a tidy sum by selling "comet pills" to the simple, pills guaranteed to protect them against all ill effects of the comet. In a way, it was perfectly honest, for those who bought the pills suffered no ill effects from the comet. (Neither did those who didn't buy the pills, of course.)

Now appearance #33 is coming up, and I am quite confident that before the comet arrives, there will be the usual predictions that California will fall into the sea and that a number of people will seek high ground.

If a comet, such as Halley's, circles the Sun in obedience to the law of gravity, completing one orbital turn every 75 or 76 years*, why is it visible for only a short period during this time? Planets, in contrast, are visible throughout their orbits.

For one thing, planets travel about the Sun in orbits that are ellipses of low eccentricity and are close to circles. This means that their distance from the Sun (and from the Earth, too) does not vary greatly as they move through their orbits. If they are visible in part of their orbit, they are therefore visible throughout all of it.

A comet such as Halley's, however, moves in an ellipse of high eccentricity, one that is cigar-shaped. At one end of its orbit, it is quite close to

** There is some variation in the interval of return because the influence of planetary attractions on passing comets can slow or speed their motions and thus somewhat change their orbit. There are occasions when a close approach of a comet to a planet — particularly Jupiter — can radically change the cometary orbit.*

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the Sun (and to Earth) while at the other, it is very distant indeed. Since it is a small body, even an excellent telescope will reveal it only when it is in that part of the orbit where it moves near the Sun ("perihelion"). It is completely lost to sight when outside this region.

What's more, a comet is a small icy body which, as it approaches the Sun, warms up. The surface ice vaporizes, releasing fine dust that is trapped in the ice. The small comet is therefore surrounded by a huge volume of hazy dust gleaming in the Sun, and the Solar wind sweeps that dust out into a long tail. It is all this dust which is prominent, rather than the comet itself, and that dust appears only when the comet is near perihelion. As the comet recedes from the Sun, it freezes again. The halo of dust disappears and only a small solid body is left, which is totally invisible. (A comet which has expended all or most of its gases in previous appearances may have only a rocky core left and may be very inconspicuous even at perihelion.)

Finally, any object in orbit moves more quickly the closer it is to the body it circles. For that reason, a comet moves much more quickly when near the sun and visible, than when far and invisible. This means it remains near the sun (and visible) for only a brief time and away from the Sun (and invisible) for a long time.

For all these reasons, Halley's Comet is visible to the naked eye for only a small portion of its 75-year orbit.

Halley's Comet, at perihelion, is only 87,700,000 kilometres from the Sun. At that time, it is closer to the Sun than Venus is. At aphelion, when it is farthest from the Sun, it is 5,280,000,000 kilometres from the Sun, farther away than the planet Neptune. Under those conditions, how does one compare the size of a cometary orbit to those of other Sun-circling objects. A simple rehearsal of distances isn't enough, since in the case of comets that varies so greatly.

We might consider the areas enclosed by the orbits. Then we can get a notion of comparative size regardless of eccentricity.

Thus, the area enclosed by the Moon's orbit as it circles the Earth is about 456,000,000,000 square kilometres, and, to avoid the zeroes, let's set that equal to "1 lunar orbital-area" or "1 LOA".

We can compare other satellite orbital-areas with that. For instance, the satellite that sweeps out the smallest orbital-area as it orbits its planet is Phobos, the inner satellite of Mars. Phobos's orbital-area is equal to 0.0006 LOA.

The satellite that sweeps out the largest orbital-area is J-IX, the outer-

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most satellite of Jupiter. Its orbital-area is 59.5 LOA, or just about 99,000 times that of Phobos. That's a spread of five orders of magnitude among satellites.

But what about the planetary orbital-areas?

The smallest one known is that Mercury. Its orbit sweeps out an area of almost exactly 23,000 LOA, which means that the smallest planetary orbital-area is 386 times as large as the largest satellite orbital-area. Clearly, the LOA unit is not a convenient one for planetary orbital-areas.

The Earth sweeps out an orbit equal in area to about 70,000,000,000,000,000 square kilometres so that 1 Earth orbital-area (EOA) is equal to a little over 150,000 LOA.

If we use EOA's as a unit, we can work out the orbital areas without much trouble for each of the planets. It would look like this:

Planet	*EOA*
Mercury	0.15
Venus	0.52
Earth	1.00
Mars	2.32
Jupiter	27.0
Saturn	91.0
Uranus	368
Neptune	900
Pluto	1,560

This is pretty straightforward. The orbital-areas are, essentially, the squares of the relative distances of the planets from the Sun.

Now, however, we can deal with the comets on the same basis, remembering to take into account the orbital eccentricities, which are too large to ignore in the case of comets. Consider, for instance, Encke's Comet, which, of all known comets, has the smallest orbit.

At perihelion, Encke's Comet is only 50,600,000 kilometres from the Sun, and it is then rather closer than the average distance of Mercury from the Sun. At aphelion, Encke's Comet is 612,000,000 kilometres from the Sun, nearly as far from the Sun as Jupiter is. If we work out the orbital-area of Encke's Comet, it comes to 2.61 EOA.

In other words, Encke's Comet sweeps out an orbital area only a little larger than that of Mars. Though in distance from the sun it may move outward nearly as far as Jupiter, its orbit is merely a fat cigar compared to Ju-

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piter's circle, and so the orbital-area of Encke's Comet is only one-tenth that of Jupiter.

And what about Halley's Comet now, which comes in as close as Venus to the Sun at one end of its orbit and retires farther than Neptune at the other end?

Its orbital-area turns out to be 82.2 EOA, nearly that of Saturn.

Suppose we compare ellipses. Every ellipse has a longest diameter, the "major axis," stretching from perihelion to aphelion through the elipse's center. It also has a shortest diameter, the "minor axis," passing through the center at right angles to the major axis.

The major axis of Halley's Comet is 5,367,800,000 kilometres long, which is 8.1 times as long as that of Encke's comet (where it is a mere 662,600,000 kilometres long). The minor axis of Halley's Comet is 1,368,800,000 kilometres, which is 3.9 times the length of that of Encke's Comet (where it is 352,500,000 kilometres long).

Notice that Halley's Comet has a major axis that is 3.92 times as long as its minor axis, whereas Encke's Comet has a major axis that is only 1.88 times as long as its minor axis. The proportions of the orbit are that of a slimmer ellipse, a longer and thinner cigar than that of the orbit of Encke's Comet. This is just another way of saying that Halley's Comet has a larger orbital eccentricity than Encke's Comet has. The orbital eccentricity of Encke's Comet is 0.847, while that of Halley's Comet is 0.967.

Although Halley's Comet has an orbit that stretches out beyond Neptune and although it requires 75 years to orbit the Sun, Halley's Comet is still a "short-term comet." Relatively speaking, it hugs the Sun and circles it quickly.

There are comets that are far more distant from the Sun than Halley's Comet is, comets that circle the Sun at distances of a light-year or more and take a million years or more to complete an orbit. We haven't ever seen these far-distant comets, but astronomers are reasonably certain they are there (see STEPPING STONES TO THE STARS, F&SF, October 1960).

Now, of course, we know of a comet which, while it is not quite one of those far distant ones, certainly has an orbit far greater than that of Halley's Comet.

It is none other than Kohoutek's Comet. It may have been "the comet that failed" because it never became as bright as astronomers had first hoped, but in a way that was not the fault of the astronomers. Kohoutek's Comet had been spied approaching (by Kohoutek, whose place on the plat-

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form I had taken on the QE2) while it was still beyond Jupiter, and that indicated a large comet. No other comet had ever been first seen at such a distance.

If Kohoutek's Comet had been of similar constitution to that of Halley's Comet — mostly icy material — it would have formed an enormous haze that would have swept out into a formidable tail, and it would have been far brighter than Halley's Comet. Unfortunately, Kohoutek's Comet must have been a rather rocky one so that as it approached perihelion, too little ice was present to vaporize and produce much of a haze. For that reason, Kohoutek's Comet turned out to be disappointingly dim for its size.

Nevertheless, it was a remarkable comet for it turned out to have an enormous orbit, the largest orbit of any known and observed object in the Solar system.

At its closest to the Sun, Kohoutek's Comet is at a distance from it of only 37,600,000 kilometres, so that it is closer to the Sun than Mercury is. It recedes, however, to a distance of about 1/18 of a light-year at aphelion, 75 times as far as Pluto at its farthest from the Sun.

Even the minor axis is 6,578,000,000 kilometres long, which is a mighty distance. It means that the ellipse marked out by the motion of Kohoutek's Comet about the Sun is wider, at its widest, than the full width of the orbit of Uranus.

This long minor axis shrinks, however, in comparison with the still more enormous length of the major axis — which is 538,200,000,000 kilometres.

The major axis of the ellipse that makes up the orbit of Kohoutek's comet is 81.8 times as long as that of Halley's Comet, while the minor axis of Kohoutek's Comet is only about 5 times as long as that of Halley's Comet. This makes it obvious that the orbital eccentricity of Kohoutek's Comet is far greater than that of Halley's Comet. The orbital eccentricity of Kohoutek's Comet is 0.99993, far greater than that measured for any other body in the Solar system.

The next question is: What is the orbital area of Kohoutek's Comet? The answer is, about 12,000 EOA, or about 77 times the orbital area of Pluto. That is enormous — though even so, it is but a small fraction of the orbital areas of the truly distant comets that circle the Sun at light-year distances.

Kohoutek's Comet affects the Sun by swinging in and out to such enormous extremes.

If we assume that Kohoutek's Comet is a solid body of rock and ice about 10 kilometres across, it would, in that case, have a mass equal to one or two quadrillionths that of the Sun. As Kohoutek's Comet swings in its elliptical or-

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bit about the center of gravity of the Sun/Comet system, the center of the Sun must do the same in such a way that the comet and the Solar center remain always on opposite sides of the center of gravity. Naturally, the motion of the sun and the comet must be in inverse proportion to their respective masses, so that if the Sun is a quadrillion or two times as massive as the Comet, it moves that many times less in distance.

Even so, as Kohoutek's Comet moves out to a distance of 1/18 of a light-year in one direction and then back, the Sun's center moves 10 to 20 centimeters in the other direction and then back. (Naturally, this motion is utterly masked by the much huger motions of the Sun in balancing the much more massive planetary bodies — especially Jupiter — even though these move through smaller distances.)

One more thing: How long does it take Kohoutek's Comet to make one swing about its orbit? Using Kepler's Third Law for that, we find that Kohoutek's Comet visits the neighborhood of the Sun once every 216,500 years.

This explains why the astronomers were caught by surprise by the dimness of Kohoutek's Comet. They couldn't be guided by the similarly disappointing performance on its previous appearance since when it previously appeared, there were no human beings other than early Neanderthalers to observe it.

And next time it appears, who knows if any human beings will be here to greet it, or whether, if there are, any of the records from 1973 will have survived.

Imagine, though, that there are living things on Kohoutek's Comet intelligent enough to be aware of a star in the sky, one that is much brighter than the others, and yet is still only a star.

For many thousands of years it would remain "only a star" not altering perceptibly in brightness. And then would come the time when the cometary astronomers might detect that actually, the star seemed to be brightening very slightly — *very* slightly. The brightening would continue. Indeed it would begin to seem to be proceeding at a very slightly accelerating pace and the rate of acceleration would itself be accelerating.

Eventually, the star would come to seem a tiny glowing globe in the sky and would be expanding wildly, then bloating madly, into a blaze of impossible heat and light.

If we imagine the living things as surviving, they would see that ball of heat and light reach a maximum, then shrink rapidly, continue to shrink more slowly and still more slowly, fading to a bright star again. The star

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would slowly dim for a hundred thousand years, then as slowly brighten for a hundred thousand years until, once again, there would come that mad flash of heat and light.

If any of you would like to write a science fiction story set on a planet with an orbit like that — be my guest.

"What's the big deal? Didn't you ever find fingerprints before?"

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Charles Platt came to the U.S. from England in 1970 after working as editor of New Worlds; *his most recent book is the Hugo-nominated book of SF profiles,* DREAM MAKERS. *Shawna McCarthy is editor of* Science Fiction Digest *and managing editor of* Analog *and* Asimov's SF Magazine. *Their collaboration conceives a brand new genre, that of the "SF gothic." Possibly it kills it off in almost the same breath, but that remains to be seen.*

Starhaven

BY

CHARLES PLATT and SHAWNA McCARTHY

The airlock door opened with a protesting creak from its ancient rusty hinges. The ominous sound echoed away through the cavernous rooms and hallways of the grand old space station.

Mark stooped to release my magnetic shoes so that he could carry me over the threshold. "It's not much, but it's home," he said with an ironic smile. "Welcome to Starhaven, darling."

Starhaven! The word was so evocative, so rich with connotations of adventure, mystery, and incalculable wealth. Spinning slowly in geosynchronous orbit thousands of kilometers above the Earth, for five centuries it had been the legendary ancestral home of the Armstrong family, pioneer prospectors who had made their fortune mining the asteroid belt. When I had started by whirlwind romance with Mark Armstrong just two short weeks ago, at the Unicorp Ball on Terra, he had promised to bring me here. Me, the daughter of a mere drive-tube maintenance engineer! At the time, I hadn't taken Mark seriously. But, now, here we were. My wildest dreams were all coming true.

Mark released me and I floated gently to the floor. "The gravity's set near zero," he explained, "because of great-grandfather's heart condition."

"Good evening, sir. And madam." The voice came from behind me. I turned in surprise and saw an ancient robot butler rolling across the entrance hall on concealed treads. His antique aluminum body had been polished and buffed so many times over the centuries that his facial expression was all but erased, and his model number, 410-A, was barely visible upon his dented forehead. "You must be the future Mrs. Armstrong, madam," he

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said to me. "My name is Fortenay, at your service." He hesitated. "Good evening, sir," he began again, "and madam—"

Mark interrupted the robot with a quick blow on the side of its metal cranium.

"—will be served in the dining room at eight," Fortenay concluded.

"Father keeps the old servants for nostalgic reasons," Mark explained, "even though their CPUs keep malfunctioning. Come, beloved; and I'll show you your room."

I followed him across the entrance hall. A giant chandelier hung from the vaulted titanium ceiling, most of its antique glow tubes still flickering authentically. The walls were hung with ancestral holograms whose eyes disconcertingly seemed to follow me as I moved. I felt as if I were drifting through a dream, although that might have had something to do with the low gravity.

Mark led me along a winding corridor. Its white plastic paneling was dusty and scratched, and the steel floor was discolored by countless years of corrosion. "The old place could do with a bit of renovation," he said apologetically.

"Oh, no!" I exclaimed. "Why, that would destroy all its sense of history!"

"It's true, Starhaven has been designated an orbital landmark," he agreed, stopping in front of a door whose number, 13, was displayed in Old American red LEDs. He touched the command panel and the door irised open.

I walked in with a mixture of apprehension and excitement. "Why, it's wonderful!" I exclaimed, taking in the genuine Naugahyde furniture, the concealed fluorescent lighting, a white swivel chair in front of a charming old computer console, and floor-length plastic drapes either side of a real porthole which afforded a breath-taking view of Earth below. "But," I added shyly, "it's only a single restraint web. Where will you be sleeping, dearest?"

"Great-grandfather's a bit neoconservative," he replied uncomfortably. "We can't share a bedroom until after the wedding. But don't worry." He kissed me upon my forehead. "I'll sneak in and visit you every night."

Then his wristwatch beeped and he gestured apologetically. "I must go see great-grandfather now. You stay here and freshen up." Once again his lips lightly brushed across my forehead. I looked up at his strong, stern face and his dark, troubled eyes. I reached to touch his cheek with my fingertips, but at that moment he turned quickly and left me alone in the room.

I stood for a moment, wondering about his look of uncertainty and preoccupation. Was there something that he had not told me? Perhaps it was inevitable that a family as old as his, claiming to trace its lineage back to the very first astronauts, would have customs and concerns which might seem mysterious to an outsider.

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I turned idly and activated the computer console. It began reciting, in an archaic voice, an impressive list of classic works preserved in its magnetic-bubble memory. Impulsively I selected "The City and The Stars" — but I was disappointed to find that the screen lit up with words instead of pictures. Petulantly, I started pressing keys at random.

I must have accidentally hit upon an environmental control code, for, to my surprise, a section of the metal wall beside the computer suddenly creaked open, revealing a dark passageway! Surely, it must be an emergency escape system. Overcome by curiosity, I ventured in. Lights blinked on and there was a distant whine of old air circulators. What could lie at the end of this curving passage? An old lifeboat, no doubt, its control panel cloaked with the dust of ages past!

I descended some metal stairs, rounded a corner, and found my way blocked by an emergency door. I hesitated, then pressed the actuator. With a groan of long-dormant machinery and a shower of dust, the door slid aside.

Imagine my disappointment when I stepped through and found I was merely in another part of the space station. The air down here smelled of rust and machine oil; I wrinkled my nose in distaste. And then a strange sound made me stop and listen.

The corridor that extended to my left was lined with doors. From behind these doors came what seemed to be the murmuring of many voices. I realized with amazement that Starhaven must still be tended by human servants, as well as by aging robots such as Fortenay. This level must be the servants' quarters — for what other explanation was there for what I heard?

At that moment my speculations were cut short. "Madam! Whatever are you doing down here?"

I turned and saw Fortenay himself rolling along the corridor toward me. "Oh!" I exclaimed. "I meant no harm, I was just exploring."

"Mr. Armstrong wouldn't want you down here," the robot told me, taking my arm and hustling me back the way he had come. "Not at all, madam. You must return to your room before anyone finds out."

I tried to explain to him about the passageway I had discovered, but Fortenay seemed not to hear. In some agitation he punched a complex code into a wall panel, hustled me into an elevator, and escorted me quickly back to my bedroom.

How very strange, I thought, as he left me on my own once more. And yet it was natural for the Armstrongs to have a strong sense of privacy. I only hoped that in due course they would come to accept me as one of their own, despite my humble origins.

Seeing that the secret entrance to the passageway was still standing open, I pressed buttons on the computer console again until I chanced

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upon a combination which closed it. Then, filled with unresolved hopes and fears, I prepared myself for dinner.

Timidly clutching Mark's arm, I entered the Grand Hall. Giant observation windows afforded a breath-taking view of the Milky Way, drifting slowly past as the space station turned endlessly on its axis. The walls were decorated with priceless mementos: I recognized an old prospector's spacesuit, a laser-powered rifle, and alien trophies from Pollux II and Orion VI, stuffed and mounted in frighteningly lifelike poses.

Mark's great-grandfather was waiting for us at one end of a solid platinum banquet table. I seated myself on the old man's left. Mark on his right. "So you're the young lady who has intentions on my grandson," he greeted me, scrutinizing me with clear blue eyes set in a face scarred by cosmic rays and lined by the passage of time.

"Your grandson?" I spoke hesitantly. "I thought Mark was your great-grandson."

"Eh? Yes, of course. Whatever."

"Great-grandfather loses track of the generations," Mark explained. His manner was offhanded, and yet — was it my imagination? — I thought I saw, again, the troubled look in his eyes.

"See, young lady," the old man confided, "I'm Mark Armstrong XI. There's been a Mark Armstrong of one number or another in this family since the very first one blasted off from Moonbase in his tin bucket of a survey ship to prospect the asteroids single-handed, back in 1920."

"You mean 2020, grandfather," said Mark. "Er, great-grandfather," he corrected himself.

"Whatever." Armstrong XI seized a wine glass and rattled it on the tabletop. "Fortenay? Fortenay! I need a drink!"

"It's too bad that more of the family couldn't be here to meet you tonight," Mark said to me. "Dad's out in the Crab Nebula putting together an import-export deal; grandfather is taking a crash-diet program on Venus; and great-great-grandfather is out on Uranus supervising the methane reclamation program for the State Department."

"Your great-great-grandfather!" I exclaimed. "However old is he?"

"Couple of centuries," Armstrong XI muttered. "Fortenay!"

At last the butler appeared, bringing a carafe of amber liquid. "Your Rigel liqueur, sir?"

"Damn right." Armstrong XI held out his glass. His hand trembled as Foratenay measured out the priceless liquid, and some was spilled. "Curse this goddamn right arm." The old man cried and seized his wrist with his left hand. "That transplant never did take properly."

"Have there been any daughters in your family?" I asked.

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Armstrong let out a bellow of laughter. "No, young lady. Don't hold with 'em. We choose boy children, every time. One per generation, eh?"

"I see. What of their wives?"

At this there was a sudden, uneasy silence. I feared I had made a terrible faux pas; at the same time, I was now sure that Mark was wrestling with some inner torment and longed to speak though for some reason circumstances inhibited him. His great-grandfather cleared his throat uneasily. "Sad business," he muttered. "My own wife passed on long ago. Chose natural death. Same thing with my son's wife, and his son's wife. People think we're a family favored by the gods. But we've had our share of misfortunes. Still, young lady, no point in dwelling on that. Tell me, have you ever been out of the Sol system?"

I tried to ignore the feelings of anxiety that threatened my equilibrium. "Outside of the Sol system?" I said. "No, I confess I have never ventured even beyond Mars." I looked down at the table in front of me, fearing I must seem gauche.

The old man chuckled. "Then I guess you've never met an Arcturan, eh?"

"No, sir, I have not. Why do you ask?"

"Well, we're having one for dinner tonight. Not supposed to, of course — cockamamie bureaucratic regulations — but they taste so good, I'll be damned if I'm going to give 'em up. Fortenay!"

The butler rolled forward attentively. "Your Rigel liqueur, sir?"

Armstrong XI seized a heavy stainless-steel serving spoon and brought it down savagely upon the hapless robot's head. "Damn it, we've already been through that! Bring on the food."

The rest of the meal continued in similar fashion, with Mark saying little, and a sense of terrible foreboding hovering over us, despite Armstrong XI's irascible bonhomie. I was quite exhausted by the end of it. After politely agreeing to watch interstellar holonews with the two men for a couple of hours, I excused myself and went to my room.

As I lay down in the restraint web, I wondered if my strange, nameless fears would allow me to sleep. But such was my fatigue that within moments I fell into a deep slumber.

I woke suddenly to the touch of a hand upon my shoulder. Pale earthshine filtered through the porthole and faintly outlined a figure bending over me. "Mark?" I whispered.

"Shhh," he told me. "Not a word."

And then I felt him slipping into the restraint web beside me, his lips searching for mine. I could barely see him in the semidarkness, but I clung to him, eager to give myself totally to my lover.

And yet — still something was wrong! Mark took me quickly, without affection, without warmth, so dif-

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ferently from his lovemaking during our courtship upon Terra. Within minutes it was over, and then without a word he left me, ignoring my plea for him to stay, please stay, just a little longer.

Alone once more and feeling even more scared and confused than before, I confess I wept a little. Long minutes passed, and sleep was about to claim me again, when once more I felt Mark touching my shoulder. He had returned!

Within moments he had joined me in the restraint web, and then, again, he was making love to me. But — it was as sudden and soulless as it had been the first time. And, again, he left me the minute that his passion was spent.

Once more I quietly cried myself to sleep, wondering what manner of man I had unwittingly pledged myself to. And then, for a third time, he joined me, took me quickly and coldly, and departed. And then — I could hardly believe it! — he came to me for a fourth time!

"No, Mark!" I cried, as his strong body pressed close to mine. "No, this is all wrong!"

"Quiet," he told me. "You'll wake someone."

"I don't care!" I exclaimed, tormented by the strange horror of my predicament. "I can't bear this! I'm going to turn on the light."

"No!" he ordered me. But, too late. The fluorescents blinked into life. And before me was a sight which I will remember as long as I live.

My lover was indeed Mark. But he was not alone. My little room was full of people. And all of them were Mark!

"Clones!" I cried. "Oh, I should have guessed!" And I saw that the door to the concealed passage was open. They had come up to my room from the lower level. These were the "servants" I thought I had heard down there.

"Quiet!" the nearest Mark was ordering me.

"Kill the light!" another was demanding. The room was full of the sound of their voices. And to my horror I saw that some of them were hideously deformed, missing arms and legs and covered with scars from surgical operations. So this was how Armstrong XI supplied himself with organ transplants for his spare-part surgery!

"Help!" I screamed, as the nearest Mark grabbed me with tortured lust in his eyes. I struggled wildly. "Help! Oh, someone, please help me!"

Mark's hand closed over my mouth, and the others surrounded me. But, at that moment, the door of my room irised open, and Fortenay was suddenly there. "You, leave her alone!" he commanded the sex-crazed clones. "With authority vested in me by the Third Law of Robotics, I order you to unhand that woman!" He started pulling the clones away from me. "With authority vested in me—" he began again, and despite my panic I

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realized why this gallant automaton was in the habit of repeating himself. There was nothing wrong with his Central Processing Unit. With so many Armstrongs to deal with, he simply became confused.

The cloned Marks seemed easily cowed by him — some form of conditioning, I guessed. Fortenay easily drove them back toward the passageway from whence they had come. "If I had known, madam," he apologized to me, "that you had found this passage and had left the lower door open, I could have prevented this. As it is, I fear you are now in terrible danger."

Before I could even begin to understand his new, dire warning, Mark — the real Mark — came running into my room, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He saw at a glance my state of shock and Fortenay closing the secret door on the last of the clones. "My God!" he exclaimed. "When great-grandfather finds out about this, he'll never let you leave Starhaven alive! Those clones were grown without a license — it's the darkest Armstrong family secret." He hesitated, as if faced with an almost unbearable decision. And then, quickly, he took my hand. "Come with me — we must leave immediately!"

And with chilling certainty, I suddenly understood why there were no surviving wives in the Armstrong family....

Mark led me down deserted corridoors, through an airlock and into a launch bay. We boarded a little survey ship, dogged the hatch, and within minutes we were blasting clear of the space station. As Starhaven shrank in the viewscreen, I fell into Mark's arms and sobbed my relief.

"It's all right," he murmured to me."We're safe now." He stroked my hair. "I should tell you the rest of the story. You see, all the Armstrongs, from Mark II all the way down to me, have been clones. Each was grown from the old one, plus a good number of 'extras' for spare parts. The reason I went to Earth and brought you back to Starhaven was that Dad had decided it was time to start a new generation, and a woman was needed to carry the child."

"But you could have used a synthetic womb for that!" I protested.

"Of course. And that's what was usually done, to grow all the 'extras.' But for the chosen child of each generation, the heir to the family fortune, only a human womb was deemed good enough. I'm afraid my family have always been rather conservative in their outlook. My dearest!" he cried, clutching me to him. "They would have used you like all the rest, for procreational purposes, and then discarded you! And I — I was going to go along with the plan — until, I fell in love with you."

I looked up at him searchingly. "Mark, you do mean it? You do love me?"

— "Of course! Why, I'm sacrificing everything, my whole inheritance,

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running away with you like this!"

I bit my lip anxiously. "Won't your family try to find me and — and do away with me — now that I know their secret?"

"Perhaps. But it's a big galaxy, beloved. It'll take them months to stop my credit on every planet of every star. By then we should have found somewhere to hide out and begin life anew."

At last, I saw, the troubled look was no longer in his eyes. I hugged him to me, confident now that Mark was everything I had always hoped for. He kissed me, and it was the warm, tender kiss of the real Mark, the one I loved, and the one I would wed.

"We wish you a Merry Christmas! We wish you a Merry Christmas! We wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!"

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Letters

Female Dream Makers

In Barry Malzberg's review of my book DREAM MAKERS he off-handedly remarks that "(Platt) has already said ... that apparently he doesn't care much for the writing of females."

Barry doesn't say where this statement comes from. He can't, because I've never said that, and it isn't true. While editing for *New Worlds* magazine I bought many stories from female writers, some of whom had never sold anything before. In the early 1970s it was at my urging that Avon Books paid what was then a considerable sum for Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*. During my editing work for the short-lived Condor Books in New York, of the four titles I bought one was a first novel by a woman. As should be evident from the short reviews which I currently write and publish in my own little magazine, The Patchin Review, there are several female authors whose work I admire considerably.

The reasons for their not being included in DREAM MAKERS are explained quite plainly in my introduction to the book. One person declined to grant me an interview; the others are writers of fantasy. I had to limit the scope of DREAM MAKERS somehow, and one way was by profiling only science-fiction writers.

—*Charles Platt*
New York, N.Y.

Does "Popular" equal "Dreadful"?

As you say, you don't often publish a letter column, but when you do it always seems (at least to me) to some extent contentious. That in the September 1981 issue is no exception, and I refer in particular to the letters from Paulette Dickerson and Mark Zimmerman and Ben Smith responding to Chris Priest's reviews of, respectively, Joan Vinge's *The Snow Queen* and Barry Longyear's *City of Baraboo*.

It's true that a central feature of *The Snow Queen* is women, but to claim, as Dickerson and Zimmerman do, that it is its most important feature smacks of nothing so much as reverse chauvinism, which is no more acceptable than the traditional male variety. The fact remains that the book is, as Priest said in his review, well told rather than well written: its language is plain, ordinary and unexacting, and the fact of its being set on a different planet matters not a whit, for the pseudo-colour and artificial exoticness of its invented locales cannot in itself compensate for the dullness of the prose in which they are rendered — and indeed, the duller and flatter the prose, the less colour they will have. One doesn't have to side with Flaubert, and claim that the perfect novel would consist of style and nothing else, but style is an important ingredient of any book; and Vinge's prose is to all intents and purposes style*less*, blunting the imaginative force of her book. I'll grant that Dickerson and Zimmerman might nevertheless have found it a powerful and gripping work, but the same is unlikely to hold true for everyone else — it meant nothing to me, for example, and nor has it meant much to many other people in Britain: it failed even to make the final ballot for this

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year's British SF Association award for the best novel of 1980.

To suggest that Priest is in any way "jealous" that he can't or won't write a novel of "comparable power" to *The Snow Queen* — but I'd suggest that he has, in respect of his latest novel, *The Affirmation* — is hardly criticism; it's merely a personal slur. The same goes for Ben Smith's comment on his review of Longyear's *The City Of Baraboo:* successful Longyear may be but, as Tom Disch pointed out in his remarks on "the Labor Day Group" in the February 1981 issue, crowd-pleasing, the selling of books in large quantities, has little or nothing to do with the literary quality of the works involved. (And in fact one could make out a good, if vastly overgeneralised case to the effect that the more popular a writer then the less worthy are his books, because only by appealing to the lowest common denominator of the audience can one achieve such success ... but the case would have to be made with one's tongue firmly pressed into one's cheek, naturally, because it would fall flat on its face when confronted with, say, John Fowles and William Golding.) For all his awards and acclaim, Longyear remains a perfectly dreadful writer, on his own admission hacking the stuff out at a tremendous rate — and pretty single-minded stuff it is too, for almost all of it seems to revolve to some degree or other around circuses, and the more such stories he writes the more self-plagiaristic he becomes. Besides, how can Smith quote Woodford's remark about the critic's lack of direct experience when he knows, or should know, that Priest is himself a writer, and thus well-acquainted with what he's talking about?

—Joseph Nicholas
London

Arthurian fans vs. Baird Searles

This is to respond to Baird Searles's review of John Boorman's *Excalibur.*

I first attended the movie in a doubtful frame of mind; as an addict of Arthurian lore, I was by no means certain that the inherent magic of the legend could be captured on film. However, not only did I leave the theater a full convert, I returned two nights later to catch the details I was sure I had missed and to savor those I hadn't. This month I skipped the intriguing "Mythago Wood" to first read Mr. Searles's usually perceptive and enjoyable column. Instead, I found a "review" containing such terms of phrase as "This *Excalibur* wasn't found in a rock; it was found under it."

Let's begin, Mr. Searles, by picking a few nits. You were wise to include the parenthetical "I think" regarding your claim that music from *Siegfried* was employed; it wasn't. The music to which I think you're refering is from *Parsifal.* I do not believe that the music was used at all inappropriately, either. The quotes from *Tristan* occur at the moments of meeting between Lancelot and Guinivere, and since the music originally deals with the hopeless love of another knight, Tristan, for his king's wife, I can't think of a better choice. Equally, the snatches from *Parsifal* occur when Sir Percival beholds the Holy Grail; *Parsifal* happens to deal with the knights of the brotherhood of the Grail.

While I can see your point regarding the "rock-singer look" of the Guinivere of the proceedings, I can't comprehend your contention that Nicol Williamson's Merlin was "watered-down." If anything, Williamson's performance strayed occasionally toward over-acting. Finally, you totally ig-

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nored the electric performance of Helen Mirren as Morgana. You also neglected to mention such a performance as that of Nicholas Clay as Lancelot. He seemed simultaneously heroically god-like and yet very human. We could truly understand Guinivere's defection from Arthur.

I can at least partially understand your complaint concerning the "speed and flatness of content, dialogue, and characterization;" I'll grant you the speed, but I didn't find the film as nearly as devoid of three-dimensional characters and situations as you apparently did. Boorman's treatment presented us with the full tale of the legendary figure of Arthur, as well as capturing a magical quality which the "splendiferously obvious" visuals do much to help achieve. The Coils of the Dragon, Morgana's grove, and the blazing sunset dominating the tableau of Arthur's and Mordred's deaths at each other's hands all make this an other-than-merely-human tale being told.

Finally, I feel that your review, Mr. Searles, does you little credit. While some of your points may have a sound basis (being partly of a matter of taste and personal opinion), you ignored many of the fine things to be found in this movie in order to capitalize on its far fewer weak points, which don't merit the emphasis you place on them. What's more, I'm afraid that you partially succumbed to the reviewer's number one sin: judging a movie on what you think it ought to be, instead of what it is. I really believe, from your past record, that you're capable of a more fair and more broad-minded approach than "Comexcalibur" indicates.

—C. Brian Weimer
Bouckville, N.Y.

I didn't like Baird Searles review of "Excalibur." I didn't go to see it to see what Arthur Pendragon was "really" like. I went to see splendiferously obvious settings, Disneyland enchanted caverns, Detroit chrome knights (armor of this type was invented much later), and England's unearthly greenery and even the over-obvious, over-used classical music.

Yeh, the characters were flat, the plot line difficult to follow (if you weren't an Arthur buff as I am) and the whole thing a bit over-blown. Like a chocolate cake, chocolate ice cream, whipped cream and nuts party, I wouldn't like to have it every year, but damn I sure loved it that once!

Jennie A. Roller
Paris, Illinois

With avid'ty 'read your *Excal'bur* critique, an' 'sympathy me th'there-'nhered pique. 'Spec'lly'n re/th' musical trim, th' movie'd rous'd'n me mirth thr'ts'nt'llectual scrim.

The funniest film that e'r I saw — with zero d'rection 'ts only flaw: to gorgeous photography 'n' comic book pacing, 't enjoined artless acting 'n' cheap gore for lacing.

Best 'f all struck me then, as profess'nal musician what cute correlation made music with vision: f'r "Rhine Maid'ns" made hymn w'thout fail at th'Lake, "Parsifal"'s overture'ncess'ntly dogged Percival's wake; Siegfried's "Rhine Journey" bouyed Lanc'lot's every 'ppearance, "'mina 'ana"'s p'rverse sex-lust.... 'each army's endurance.

An 'ndressing 'f legend in ev'ry particular, th'movie's mag'" costumes framed per'od t'p'rfection'n recticular.

One message 'ndeed fell weight'ly across — Christ'anity 'it 'ngland 'midst loathsom'st dross.

—Joseph E. Quittner
Cleveland Heights, Ohio

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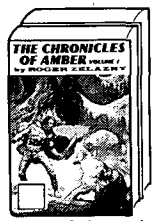

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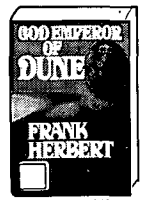

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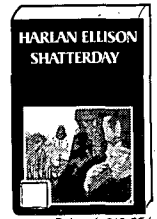

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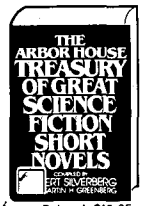

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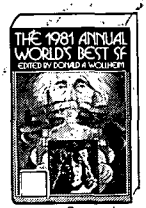

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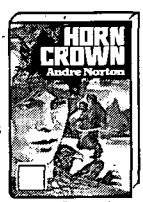

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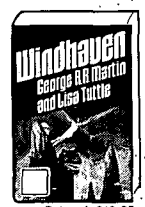

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